

BR
563
N4
T78

BLACK PASTORS
AND LEADERS:
Memphis, 1819-1972

DAVID M. TUCKER

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Theology Library
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

Copyright © by Memphis State University Press, 1975
All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Tucker, David M 1937—
Black pastors and leaders.

Includes bibliographical references.

1. Negro clergy—Tennessee—Memphis. 2. Negroes—Memphis. I. Title.
BR563.N4T78 280'.092'2[B] 75-1248
ISBN 0-87870-024-2

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This publication was made possible in part by a grant from the Tennessee Historical Commission.

Contents

Acknowledgement	vii
Preface	ix
1 Freedom to Worship	1
2 The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church	17
3 The Churches and Secret Societies	25
4 Reverend Imes and the Crisis of the Nineties	41
5 Racial Adjustment and Reverend T. O. Fuller	55
6 Reverend Griggs and Black Social Efficiency	71
7 The Church of God in Christ	87
8 Preachers and Protest	101
9 Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr. and the Garbage Strike	119
10 Black Theology	139
Epilogue: Pastors and Leaders	152
Index	155

Acknowledgments

This book began during research for a political biography, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (1971), when I sought, unsuccessfully, to understand the leadership role of the black clergy. They were never the Republican bosses, it seemed, but did exercise a varied influence as civic and political spokesmen which could never be explained in a biography of a secular businessman: they merited their own separate study.

Most of my scholarly debts are acknowledged in the notes, but many others opened doors to these sources. For my knowledge of the C.M.E. Church, I thank Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, the local authority on black Methodism, and Professor O. T. Peoples and Reverend John M. Exum of the C.M.E. Church Publishing House which moved to Memphis in 1970. Their denominational weekly, *The Christian Index* (1886-1972), is a major source for black church history and is now being microfilmed for libraries.

I learned little about the Church of God in Christ before meeting Mr. Odie H. Tolbert and Mrs. Elsie W. Mason who opened the files of *The Whole Truth* for microfilming (only the last five years have been preserved) and arranged for me to interview the major church bishops.

Reverend C. J. Gaston, director of the Griggs Business College, opened his collection of Sutton E. Griggs correspondence and legal documents. Mrs. Lillie B. Nelson kindly shared her

extensive knowledge of Memphis Baptists. Mrs. Joan Beifuss and Professor David Yellin let me read the interviews with Reverend James M. Lawson, which the Memphis Search for Meaning Committee recorded after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The Committee interviewed every important individual associated with the 1968 garbage strike, and these interviews are an important source for Memphis and for black history.

Dewey F. Pruett, curator of Special Collections at John Brister Library, made my job much easier by purchasing all the obscure books and materials which other Memphis State librarians refer to as "Dewey's junk." Professors Sidney E. Mead, August Meier, and C. Eric Lincoln provided critical readings for the manuscript. Cynthia Grant Tucker gave textual and literary criticism meriting the title of co-author.

Preface

The clergy have always been important leaders within the Negro community, and yet the literature about them is one of the thinnest and least adequate we have. Only the Father Divines and the Elijah Muhammads have drawn scholarly attention, while the main line of black pastors has been left largely to the denominational chroniclers. The neglect of black church history is not surprising when one considers that the widely scattered sources, the long tradition of oral rather than written sermons, and the absence of congregation records have conspired to make the work of an historian a formidable task. Yet churches and ministers did leave their impressions in the local historical records, and by patiently excavating these sources one can assemble valuable material and lay the foundation on which a more comprehensive history of black Christianity can eventually be built. This study of Memphis pastors is offered as one of the essential building blocks for better understanding the role of religion in the life and history of Negro Americans.

The story of black religion, of course, began long before 1819, when white speculators first began to transform a deserted river bluff into a prosperous port named Memphis. For more than two hundred years black men had been sold from Africa to the Americas and taught that the white man's god was stronger and more influential than the gods worshipped in Africa. In com-

ing to accept Christianity, blacks had taken one of the steps by which Africans crossed over to American culture. By the time blacks moved out to the Tennessee frontier, this process of cultural assimilation had been at work for two centuries, and so effectively that virtually all of the Negroes arriving in Memphis had been born into a Christian Afro-American tradition.

Although the story of black Christianity did not begin in Memphis, the city serves as an excellent window to the crucial century and a half during which blacks gained freedom from the restrictions of slave religion and, while wrestling with the problem of living in white America, built their own separate black denominations. The Baptist faith emerged as the religion of the masses, and the Memphis story clearly explains that denomination's appeal. Although Methodism ran a distant second, its largest southern branch, the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, was born in West Tennessee; and its first congregation in Memphis, Collins Chapel, provides an excellent example of the nineteenth century middle-class church. The Bluff City's local clergy also represented a range of positions, with those who made the Bible a text for protest at one end, and those who found it an authority supporting accommodation to the social order, on the other. Reverends Sutton E. Griggs and Thomas O. Fuller are eloquent models of the accommodating ministers who became dominant in the black community. By tracing the Church of God in Christ, a religious sect organized in Memphis and expanded into a major black denomination and the world's largest pentecostal organization, one can follow the development of the storefront church in urban America. In the same way, the recent movement of the black church towards civil rights and militancy is illustrated by the ministerial leadership in the desegregation protests and the fateful Memphis garbage strike—which brought Martin Luther King to Memphis for the last time—and is manifest in the new Black Theology. As one of America's major black population centers and a representative example of developments within the black church, Memphis provides an historical understanding of black religion in America.

I have chosen to approach the black clergy of Memphis chiefly through a series of biographical essays. With only frag-

mentary records existing for most clergymen, an historian can make his deepest penetration into black Christianity by attending carefully to those pastors who were most conspicuous in articulating the concerns of their own community. If these ministers were not typical, they did wrestle with problems common to all black Memphians and their stories thus document not only a study of clerical leadership but also their people's struggle and pilgrimage.

1

Freedom to Worship

Blacks helped to bring Christianity to Memphis. The community's first local preacher was Harry Lawrence, a Negro Methodist who often preached to mixed gatherings of blacks and whites in the newly formed bluff village. When he wasn't at religious meetings, Lawrence may have been the "wicked old sinner," whites said he was, but as a Bible exhorter he impressed both races. Even after local revivals were split into separate racial congregations, many lower-class whites continued to attend the Negro meetings where blacks surpassed their white counterparts in "strength of lungs, agility, and originality of exclamation."¹

The popular black Christian style had evolved from a confluence of African and European religious traditions. While black tongues were replaced by King James English, and black theology by the message of John Wesley or Peter Cartwright, the rhythms of Negro spirituals, and the congregation's enthusiastic participation in meetings had their roots in Africa. Back in West Africa worshipers had been possessed by their gods, who threw them

1. James D. Davis, *History of Memphis* (Memphis: Hite, Crumpton & Kelly, 1873), 171-173.

into violent motion, causing them to roll, fall, jump, and prophesy. This African religious frenzy survived in America and while it might resemble white revival behavior, whites readily admitted black superiority in religious enthusiasm. Whites also recognized the contribution of black religious music, the spirituals, those beautiful folk melodies fashioned from the themes and images of the Bible, couched in black vernacular and rhythmic African beats.²

Since blacks did learn the language and concepts of Christianity from whites, it was only natural that much of black religion would reflect and imitate that of the whites. Black Christianity would therefore not be limited to revival emotionalism; some blacks followed the more subdued white Presbyterian style of worship. An Englishman visiting Memphis in the fall of 1831 described one black service, marked by restraint, he had seen in the river town of then less than a thousand inhabitants.

I strolled out in the evening to enjoy the cool breeze and moonlight on the verge of the forest. In a lone house, in a lane, I heard the sound of psalm-singing, about eleven o'clock at night, and stopped to listen to a tune which the Covenanters in the days of their adversity had often lifted on the hill side, when prepared to contend for their religion to the death. The psalm ceased, and a Negro slave delivered a long extempore prayer like those of the Presbyterians, and using excellent language. The prayer was followed by a sermon, in which the fall of our first parents was described, and its consequences to the human race; "born in sin, and conceived in iniquity"; but regenerate through the instrumentality of a Redeemer. The audience consisted of a few Negro men and women, sitting on forms in a loft, lighted by a solitary candle. The preacher could neither read nor write; yet he expressed himself clearly,

2. Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 216; Joseph R. Washington Jr., "How Black is Black Religion," *Quest for a Black Theology*, eds. James J. Gardiner & J. Deotis Roberts (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971), 25-31.

eloquently, and energetically. I went away pleased and astonished with what I had seen and heard³

In 1831 the white Memphis community had yet to build a single church, but over the next decade Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists would build houses of worship with galleries and separate Sunday school rooms for Negroes. Wesley Chapel was erected by the Methodists in 1832, and within a year they had eighteen blacks and thirty-two whites in their membership. A decade later the black congregation had grown to 234, and by the early fifties 500 black Methodists had their own separate services, led by their own black preacher, in the Wesley Chapel basement. It was Reverend Daniel H. Jones, a slave, who had been licensed by the Methodist District Conference on 3 Nov. 1851 to preach to the basement congregation. In this capacity Reverend Jones so impressed his white fellow ministers that they took up a collection to buy him and his wife out of slavery and send them to Africa as missionaries. Unfortunately the black Reverend died in 1854, before he could carry the Gospel back to Africa. Reverend Jones's Methodists remained a part of the Wesley Chapel until 1859 when the whites officially reorganized them as a separate congregation, Collins Chapel. The congregation took its name from the white minister, Reverend J. T. C. Collins, who was assigned to them by the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.⁴

The white Baptists in Memphis, like the Methodists, expressed concern for the Christian education of blacks. The local West Tennessee Baptist Convention affirmed: "Slaves are rational, moral and accountable beings, and as such should be instructed as to the number, nature and extent of the duties they owe to God and man, and the manner in which they may acceptably perform them."⁵ Baptist masters were expected to take their slaves to

3. J. E. Alexander, *Transatlantic Sketches* II (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 75; I have capitalized "Negro" in this and all other quotations where it appeared in the lower case.

4. H. S. Jacoby, "First Church, Memphis: Historical Notes," (First Methodist Church Archives).

5. "Report of the Moral and Religious Instruction of the Colored Population of West Tennessee," *West Tennessee Baptist Convention* 1848 (Dargan-Carver Library, Baptist Sunday School Board, Nashville).

church and revival meetings where, in separate congregations, a Home Missionary would preach, lecture, and catechise them. Once a month the white deacons would read and pray with the black congregation and twice a month the pastor would preach. Nor were white Baptists content with preaching only to their own blacks. They sent out the Home Missionary to reach all unchurched Negroes in the area.

While whites could agree that God wanted moral and religious instruction for Negroes, they were split over the method of instruction, some advocating oral and others "letter" instruction. Presbyterian slaveholders seemed to believe that blacks could best be saved by the same methods employed with the whites: teaching each man to read and explain the Bible for himself; so every Sunday in the First Presbyterian Church, slaves were taught reading as a part of their religious and moral education. Knowing the Bible would never make a slave less diligent, obedient, or respectful, the Presbyterian Reverend Edward Porter declared; to the contrary, it would make "the servant a better servant, in any and every sense of the term."⁶ So Scriptural reading in Presbyterian Sabbath schools was conducted until December, 1856, when irate Shelby County planters complained that reading would give Negroes a key not only to the Bible, but to the writings of northern abolitionists as well. The Memphis city government capitulated to this pressure, promptly enacting a city ordinance prohibiting all letter instruction for Memphis blacks and just to be safe, the city aldermen prohibited Negro Christians from preaching to their own congregations.⁷

Memphis, like most larger towns in the South, had an independent Baptist house of worship where blacks could conduct their own services. This church, which in 1850 was drawing a sizable congregation from the city's 109 free blacks and the 2,362 Negro slaves, had been built by an eccentric white mechanic and silversmith, Silas T. Toncray. As an Old School or Primitive Baptist, Toncray represented the frontier revolt against educated

6. *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 4, 6 December 1856.

7. *Ibid.*, 14 December 1856; J. M. Keating, *History of the City of Memphis* I (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1888), 381.

Baptists who sponsored theological seminaries, missionary societies, and Sunday schools. Toncray stood for footwashing and salvation by grace alone, without the interference of a trained ministry. From his own meager resources, he provided a plot of land at the corner of Main and Overton Streets and in 1837 erected a handsome little chapel known as Toncray's or the African Church. For the most part, Reverend Toncray's congregation had been black, since the presence of whites, who sometimes ridiculed his efforts at eloquence, understandably irritated him; and after his death in 1847 the church was turned over to Negroes exclusively. But the black Baptists' freedom from the eye of the white man did not last very long; a city ordinance soon required that a white man, appointed by the city aldermen, be present at every service in the African Church;⁸ and, in 1856, it even became illegal for a black to preach to the congregation. Not until the Union armies captured Memphis in 1862 were local blacks to find any real freedom of worship.

Once Memphis fell under Union government, the city became a center for rural Negroes who swarmed into the contraband camps established just south of the river town ready to take advantage of their new religious freedom. In camps Fiske and Shiloh, where nightly prayer meetings were held, northern whites were amazed by the number of black preachers and exhorters among the escaped rural slaves and so impressed by the sermons they heard that they made written transcripts of them.⁹ One of these sermons preached by a former slave known as Uncle Jerry, was recorded by a northern white nurse and teacher.

A lettles while ago we was all down in Mississipp or ole' Ginny or somewhar else, wid our heads bowed down a groan in' under de yoke of bondage, but de Lord He hear our groans ober de cook-pot and in de cotton patch,—he

8. *Memphis Daily Eagle*, 15 February 1847; Davis, *History of Memphis*, 231-232; *Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Memphis 1826-57* (Memphis: Memphis Bulletin Company, 1857), 124.

9. John Eaton, *Grant, Lincoln and the Freedmen* (New: Longmans, Green, & Company, 1907), 35-36.

hear our prayers down in de corn-field, and 'long side de gum tree. Den he sen de sogers from de North, de chains fall off, and He say, yo poor slaves, and now we is here on liberty's ground a worshiping God, under our own vine & fig-tree. And de good Lord, he hab sent us dese good ladies—dey couldnt shoder dese arms, but de Lord hab put it into dare hearts to come and teach us poor African race.¹⁰

Northern men also wondered at the freedmen's rich store of religious melodies and lyrics, entirely new to northern ears. One missionary to Memphis, for example, recalled her cook, Queen Victoria, chanting a plantation spiritual: "Remember Daniel, Daniel in the Lion's den, dem Hebrew children too, cast in the burning fiery furnace. Thou didst deliver them. O! Lord deliver me. Thou didst deliver them, why not deliver me?"¹¹

After the Union victory almost a dozen white protestant ministers from the North moved into the growing black Memphis community of 15,000 to establish schools and churches. The American Missionary Association and the Congregational Church together founded Lincoln Chapel, while the northern Methodist Church constructed Centenary Chapel. Yet the most successful churches were not those begun by northern whites, but those established by the Negroes themselves. For one thing, Negroes frankly preferred to have black men in the pulpit. As the Congregational pastor admitted in August 1865, "I know *three* ministers—who are very ready to complain because the colored people prefer to hear their own preachers."¹² White ministers apparently were unable to intone the spirituals or invoke the traditional ritual necessary for stirring the unconscious, the soul of the black believer. Whites could not preach the Gospel in the

10. L. Humphrey to Chaplain Fiske, March 1863, American Missionary Association Archives (Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans).

11. Henrietta Matson to G. Whipple, 6 October 1868, AMA Archives.

12. Ewing O. Tade to Corresponding Secretary, 1 August 1865, AMA Archives.

vernacular language of the people and they probably preferred preaching good works and moral behavior rather than celebrating God's emancipation of the black race. None of the churches for Negroes which were kept under white leadership were ever able to prosper in Memphis; the successful ministries were those established and run by the blacks.

Among the most successful Negro churches was one founded by a black missionary from the North, H. N. Rankin. Rankin had been a student in 1863 when the Western Freedman's Aid Commission, headed by the white Methodist Reverend Adam Poe of Cincinnati, commissioned him as a teacher for southern freedmen. Rankin took a steamboat south to Memphis, "as proud and as enthusiastic as De Soto . . . when he embarked upon his ships with his 600 young Spaniards and his twelve priests to perform religious services in the new world."¹³ Rankin recalled, "I was forcibly struck with the idea of me planting the tree of knowledge as a pioneer." He arrived in the fall of 1863, took a position as regimental teacher for the black Third Tennessee heavy artillery, and with the help of a soldier, a planter, and a shoemaker, set up an African Methodist Episcopal Church in an Army tent. To make the operation official, Rankin had an ordained A.M.E. minister from Ohio come down to conduct the services. By 1867 this church had moved into a \$10,000 edifice erected on the corner of Hernando and Desoto, and given the name of Avery Chapel, after the building fund's largest donor.¹⁴

Most successful of all, however, were the Baptists who won more converts than all the other black denominations combined. One of the spiritual leaders of this group was a little man named Africa Bailey, a former slave liberated from a Mississippi cotton plantation by the Union Army in 1863, and drafted into service for the North. In uniform Bailey had proved his leadership ability by advancing to the rank of sergeant, and immediately after the war he went out to work the Baptist field, taking as his territory Fort Pickering, as South Memphis was then called. At

13. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 2 January 1899.

14. *Memphis Daily Post*, 15 May, 31 July 1866, 18 February 1867.

first he had nothing more than a brush arbor with a sawdust floor set up near the corner of Florida and Broadway in which to preach the Gospel. By 1867 Bailey's Salem Baptist congregation had 242 members and held its services in a solid frame building.¹⁵

A more prominent black Baptist, Reverend Morris Henderson, had been born in Virginia in 1802 and brought to Memphis as a carriage driver at the age of 47. Very dark and diminutive, Henderson had originally attended the local African Church, but disagreeing with some of the Old School sentiments, he gathered about him a little company of five believers, whom he served as an unordained Christian minister for more than a decade. In 1864, after Memphis became a Union city, Henderson received his Baptist ordination. The following year the ladies of his congregation raised \$406.50 with a church fair, enabling the pastor to make the down payment for a building site on Beale Street. The congregation erected a crude shelter of refuse lumber and began an extended revival which increased their membership of 600 at the rate of thirty a week. Sunday collections at the First Baptist became a highly celebrated event. With great fanfare, members would march to the front to place their nickels, dimes, and quarters on a large, covered dining room table, and reports were the deacons used shovels and buckets to take the collections away. More than one hundred dollars was taken in every Sunday, until, by the end of October, 1866, the congregation had completely paid for their \$5,000 church lot. Except for a single contribution of \$50, they had done it without white assistance.¹⁶

The Reverend Henderson, who could barely read or write, showed as much concern for Christian education as for building a place of worship. His congregation started a program of instruction in 1865. They hired a white man, Samuel G. Silliman, to supervise a day school with a faculty of two, and a pair of Sabbath

15. *Commercial Appeal*, 2 January 1899; *Daily Post*, 6 November 1867.

16. *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, 17 October 1877; *Daily Post*, 30 October 1866; the \$50 contribution came from Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, a former slave trader and the commanding officer for the Fort Pillow massacre.

schools.¹⁷ That Silliman was given a salary of \$75 a month, almost three times what the pastor set aside for himself, is an indication of Henderson's commitment to church education and selfless dedication to his parishioners. Respected by the lay folk and clergy alike, he was accorded the honor of an invitation to deliver the introductory sermon at the 1867 meeting of the Tennessee Colored Missionary Baptist Association.¹⁸

Reverend Henderson pressed forward with the building program in 1869, completing one floor of a permanent brick structure which, when completed, would be one of the largest and most impressive in Memphis. A prudent man, Henderson was careful not to lead his people into ruinous debt. He built a step at a time, never contracting for more than the treasury could pay without strain. His urgent appeals to his congregation for money to carry on the work brought in \$44,408.72 during his twelve year ministry.¹⁹ In his mind, every dollar brought into the edifice should be given to the church. One Sunday morning, when a member told him she had lost five dollars somewhere in the building, Reverend Henderson announced to his congregation: "If any of you finds it fetch it up to the treasury. I don't know what the sister done with it here if it wasn't to give to the Lord."²⁰

In these glorious years of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God for new freedom, so many wanted to join the services in the Beale Street Church that members were requested to attend only once on Sundays to leave room for others to worship in the church. When, with the passage of time, freedom lost its novelty and religious enthusiasm began to wane, Reverend Henderson became stern and rebuked his people for their loss of dedication.

17. *Daily Post*, 2 April 1867.

18. *Ibid.*, 27 November 1867.

19. The oral tradition and T. O. Fuller's *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee* (Memphis: Haskins Printers, 1936) recall that Reverend Henderson built the Beale Street Church for \$100,000 but that figure is clearly in error. At the time of Henderson's death, his church gave the figure of \$44,408.72 as the total amount he had raised, *Daily Avalanche*, 27 October 1877.

20. *Daily Avalanche*, 10 April 1877.

Once, in 1877, when they failed to be punctual for a weekly prayer meeting, he warned: "See yere now, you all has got to comin' here mighty late these nights. When you was in slavery I've seen the time when these valleys would fairly ring with your songs and pra'rs all the time. Freedom's goin' to keep lots of you all out of heaven." But Henderson's heart was with the people and, to the amusement of the congregation, he softened his rebuke by adding, "I'se glad I's free, though."²¹

Henderson sought to maintain moral standards in his church and community by casting out Baptists who broke the law. In 1867 alone, his church dismissed eleven members and excluded thirty-two. At the same time, as a member of the Tennessee Missionary Baptist Association, he worked with other Baptist ministers to reject any pastor who failed to give proper leadership to his flock. To protect the church and the race from Reverend Hubbard Meredith's example, Henderson helped to censor the minister and force him to resign from the pastorate of the Chelsea Baptist Church.²² Henderson told the story to a white reporter:

You see there was a man who was a candidate for the ministry. We elders examined him and found that he was not prepared to act as a minister of the Gospel, and we couldn't think of laying hands on him. Now Hubbard Meredith goes to him and tells him that if he gives him \$25 he'll ordain him. You see Meredith said his church was sovereign. Well, this young brother he scrapes up all the money he can, but he only gets \$10.

Meredith didn't take that, Uncle Morris?

Yes he did, sir! Wasn't it shocking? The Association at Brownsville was going to look into his case, and what you think he did? He wrote that he was very sick and expecting to die, and they postponed it.

That was a trick?

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 11 October 1877.

A lying trick, sir. I met him when I came home and I said, "Look here, Brother Hubbard, you don't look like you've been sick." He said, "Yes I have. I had a chill and I was tolerable sick." Then I said, "Brother Hubbard, the Lord will strike you down if you don't stop this way of doing." He is a deceitful man, sir.²³

The same state Baptist Association which examined candidates for the ministry also sought to elevate the religious education of pastors and congregations through a semi-monthly religious journal, the *Missionary Baptist*, first issued in 1871. Under the editorship of Henderson's church clerk, Charles C. Dickinson, the journal, which drew the attention of the white press as "the only religious newspaper owned and managed by colored people in the southwest," was highly commended for its "considerable newspaper skill and real editorial ability."²⁴ The Tennessee Baptist Association showed its support for the intellectual and spiritual goals of Henderson's *Missionary Baptist* by the resolutions which it adopted in 1872:

Resolved, That we consider it the solemn duty of every pastor, both in public and in private, to labor by every means for the spiritual and intellectual advancement of the present and the rising generation.

1st—We recommend the vigorous prosecution of the Sabbath school and Bible class as a certain and sure instrument in this work.

2d—We most earnestly recommend the immediate introduction of a regular religious newspaper to every family in our churches.

3d—We also recommend every pastor to seek out the active minded young persons of his congregation and encourage them to develop their powers by study, in order

23. *Ibid.*, 5 September 1877.

24. *Ibid.*, 3 March 1871; *Daily Appeal*, 23 April 1871.

to increase their greater usefulness in the church and country.

Resolved, That we discourage our churches from licensing young men to preach the Gospel who are not able to read and understand the heavenly message God has given us.

Resolved, That we encourage the work of ministerial education at Nashville, by contributing our means to its support; and that all pastors make it their duty to urge as many promising young men as they can find to attend the present school in Nashville.²⁵

When Reverend Henderson died on 26 October 1877, without ever seeing his Beale Street Church completed, five thousand blacks gathered to hear a white Baptist minister preach the funeral sermon and read the Scripture: "I have fought a good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord will give me in that day." Both white newspapers eulogized the little black man who had brought 2,500 members into his church and ministered to them. The *Daily Avalanche* wrote:²⁶

Rev. Morris Henderson—"Uncle Morris" as most of us knew him—has for years been the most influential man of his race in the city of Memphis, and we wish to record it here that never, so far as known, has he used his influence for aught but the good of his people. He was pastor of the Beale Street Baptist Church, and the advisor and leader of the clergy of his faith and race for miles around. He was an illiterate old man, endowed with a generous, simple heart, a shrewd mind and indomitable energy. In appearance he was a thin, amiable-looking, and very black little man, of modest, unobtrusive and courteous manner.

25. *Daily Avalanche*, 8 September 1872.

26. *Ibid.*, 27 October 1877.

Hundreds of his race who possessed a hundred times more education looked up to the little man with reverence and respect. On the sincerity of his religion, in the good common sense with which Nature had endowed him, he commanded the esteem of all who met him.

The *Daily Appeal* added:²⁷

Rev. Morris Henderson was a colored minister whose zeal and piety, to say nothing of his energy and active Christian life, endeared him to his race, and won for him the respect and confidence of the white people. Perhaps no colored man ever lived who held a higher position in the estimation of the people of Memphis. With all the zeal and ardor of his religion, this minister always exercised a due regard for sinners, and with the most wicked men of his race exercised an influence and commanded respect. He studiously avoided politics, and instead of being a bigot or an emotional enthusiast, he was reasonable, just, and kind in his conduct and deeds. His death is to be regretted, for he accomplished much good, and gave his people the benefit of wise counsels in everything appertaining to their spiritual and social welfare. He was indeed a pious man, an humble Christian, loving and serving God. No wonder, then, that the death of such a man should call forth a tribute to the memory of the virtues which made his life all that could be desired in humility and Christian zeal.

If Reverend Henderson had held the esteem of local whites because of his moral leadership, he was liked all the more because he had kept himself out of the white man's game of politics. Although the pastor had once permitted political meetings in his church, when the city's Negroes first gained the vote in 1867, by 1872 he and his deacons had firmly closed the church doors to

27. *Daily Appeal*, 30 October 1877.

any and all Republican meetings.²⁸ The white Democrats in Memphis had thus been reassured that Henderson's concerns, like those of most ex-slave preachers, were primarily religious, and therefore safe. One of the younger, more outspoken Baptist ministers, Reverend W. H. Phillips for example, could preach a memorial service for Senator Charles Sumner, eulogizing his commitment to racial equality and observing that "our white sisters and brethren really act as if they thought there were back seats, second-class fare, and Jim-Crow cars in heaven," but even Reverend Phillips did not seek political leadership.²⁹ Negro ministers in Memphis left race politics to the secular militants and so excluded themselves from the political arena, that of the dozen blacks who held public office during the sixties and seventies, not a single one was a minister. They built their churches, led their congregations in an outpouring of soul—music, dance, and song—and thanked God for bringing the race up out of slavery. And a great many black Memphians worshiped in church far into the morning hours, frequently scandalizing whites by what appeared to be their wild heathenish dances as the brothers and sisters "got happy" and "got religion."

The Negroes' desire to escape from the eye of the white man and pursue their own style of religion would seem to explain their dissatisfaction in black congregations supervised by whites. Members of the white organized Church of Advent (Christian) stamped their feet, shouted, and disrupted the service when the white minister of Linden Street Christian Church tried to preach to them. The Episcopal Emmanuel Chapel never attained a hundred members until the 1890s. Second Congregational Church never became self-supporting until after its white minister re-

28. *Daily Post*, 24 December 1867; *Daily Appeal*, 27 June 1872.

29. *Daily Appeal*, 20 March 1874; Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1945), 198, suggests that ministers were usually lured into office holding during Reconstruction, but Woodson's thesis is untrue for Memphis; for an understanding of the religious message of the antebellum preachers, see Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God, as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 19-65.

signed in 1880. And until the black Presbyterians moved out of the basement of the whites' First Presbyterian Church in 1887, they failed to achieve a substantial membership.³⁰

The Baptists, who had the most freedom, and had it earliest, grew to twelve congregations—Beale Street, Middle, Primitive, Salem, St. John, Pilgrim Rest, Bethlehem, Mount Zion, St. Paul, Central, First Baptist Chelsea, and Ebenezer—by the end of the seventies.³¹ The next successful, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had its four congregations, Avery, Providence, St. Andrews, and St. James Chapels. Both the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal had only a single functioning congregation. But least prosperous were the white-controlled mission congregations which were dependent on the Presbyterian, Congregational, Christian, northern Methodist, and Episcopal churches. Black religion grew best when left to be cultivated by blacks.

30. *Daily Avalanche*, 2 July 1876; P. M. Radford, "Immanuel Mission," (Archives, University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee); Fred Hutchins, *Sketch History of Second Congregational Church 1868-1968* (Memphis: Fred Hutchins, 1968), 2; *Daily Avalanche*, 28 July 1890.

31. *Sholes Memphis Directory for 1880* (Memphis: A. E. Sholes, 1880).

2

The Colored Methodist Episcopal Church

After black Methodists in Memphis split into four separate denominations, it was the C.M.E. Church which eventually enrolled the largest local membership.¹ But for more than a generation after the Civil War, the C.M.E. still lagged far behind the African Methodist Episcopal denomination which captured the masses with its strong ties to the cause of black liberation. Organized by free northern blacks in 1816, the A.M.E. Church had a proud abolitionist tradition, with its ministers serving as chaplains for black regiments in the Union Army. When this militant church came south with the northern troops it was easily able to recruit members by the thousands.²

1. Other Wesleyan denominations were the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and the Methodist Episcopal Church.

2. Officially the AME Church might have been termed "emancipationist" rather than "abolitionist" in the years before the war, but if the local oral

While the A.M.E. was associated with the black man's freedom, the C.M.E. had ties with the slavery church—namely, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. After the war, this church of slaveholders attempted to retain its 207,000 freedmen in a separate Jim Crow conference, but most went over to the black freedom church, leaving fewer than 40,000 in the old church. Concerned black ministers petitioned the 1870 General Conference of Southern Methodism, asking that an independent denomination be established for them so that their congregations would not continue to suffer from declining membership. The Negro pastors sought to leave the southern Methodist Episcopal Church on the best of terms with their white brethren.³ Rather than seceding, they asked for official release, and expressed their gratitude and confidence in the white churchmen:

You were our masters, you were kind, conscientious, and exhibited the deepest anxiety for our welfare. It was through the influence of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, that we were converted to God, your missionaries endeared themselves to our people by devotion to our interests when we were slaves. Through them we learned the way of salvation; by them our marriage ceremonies were performed, our children baptised, our dead buried. From their hands we received the consecrated bread and wine, symbols of the body and blood of Christ. From their lips

tradition is correct, southern black Methodists were attracted by the protest image of the "freedom church" and its "proud abolitionist heritage," increasing the denominational membership from 20,000 in 1864 to 391,044 by 1884; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 82-84; Charles Spencer Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Publishing House, 1922), I:335-345, II:497.

3. C. H. Phillips, *The History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America* (Jackson, Tenn.: C.M.E. Publishing House, 1900), 23-27; L. H. Holsey, *Autobiography, Sermons, Addresses, and Essays* (Atlanta: Franklin Printing Co., 1898), 214-216; Hunter Dickinson Farish, *The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A Social History of Southern Methodism 1865-1900* (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1938), 66, 164-165.

our children received catechetical instruction and were taught the simple truths of the Bible. The recollections of the past, to us, are hallowed by associations the most touching and tender conceivable.⁴

But affection for the masters did not deter the black Southern Methodists from seeking religious freedom and the opportunity to be their own guides. Freedom seemed to be God's plan, just as slavery had formerly been ordained by God. Negro Methodists believed that "God, in his providence, had said to the Christians of the South: 'Take these sons of Africa and train them for me, and in my time I will call for them.'"⁵ First God had called blacks out of slavery, and now He seemed to be calling them from the old slavery church, where membership cost them so much abuse by their own race.

So it was that the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church officially organized with a General Conference, beginning 15 December 1870, where black delegates from eight of the southern states selected a name for their denomination, adopted the ritual and discipline of the Southern Methodists, appointed a white editor of their denominational weekly, the *Christian Index*, and elected two bishops—Reverends William Henry Miles of Kentucky and Richard H. Vanderhorst of South Carolina—whom bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South ordained.⁶

4. *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, 7 May 1870.

5. L. H. Holsey quoted in Atticus G. Haygood, *Our Brother in Black* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1881), 240.

6. Phillips, *The History of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in America*, 27-47; M. C. Pettigrew, *From Miles to Johnson* (Memphis: C.M.E. Publishing House, 1970), 6-9; Reverend Samuel Watson began publishing the *Christian Index* for Negro Methodists in 1869 and the Southern Methodists urged the new denomination to continue their support of the weekly religious paper. Three years later Reverend E. B. Martin became the first black editor for the *Index* and the denominational membership of 67,888, *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 23 October 1869, *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, 11 May 1870, 26 April 1873.

According to oral tradition, light skin was just as necessary for C.M.E. leadership as jet blackness was for an A.M.E. bishop. Certainly five of the first seven C.M.E. bishops were in fact mulattoes, but one of the first two to be elected was black. "Bishop Miles is *bright*," an observer of the organizing Conference admitted, "but Bishop Vanderhorst . . . is *black* enough for any of us."⁷ We know, too, that local spokesmen for the light-skinned C.M.E. Collins Chapel in Memphis repudiated color prejudice. "Every preacher," a member of the congregation said, "has received a cordial welcome when appointed to our church. Whether he was so bright in complexion that one would take him to be white, or so black that his shadow would not follow him, he is welcome."⁸

One of their dark preachers, Reverend C. H. Phillips, not only pastored at Collins Chapel, but persuaded this most prestigious congregation in Tennessee to accept changes in their religious services. After the bishop assigned Phillips to Collins Chapel, in 1885, the young pastor arrived with impressive credentials, a B.A. from Central Tennessee College and an M.D. from Meharry Medical School. When Reverend Phillips learned that the 11 A.M. Sunday sermon had been the least important of the three Sunday services, that pastors had preached at 3 P.M. and 8 P.M. services but let visiting preachers conduct the morning worship, he promptly conferred with his board members, stopped preaching at 3 P.M., and made the morning worship the principal service. He also talked his board into permitting the tall traditional wooden pulpit to be replaced with a short pulpit more in keeping with practical American tastes. Despite his dark skin and his innovations, Phillips remained for the traditional two years. At the close of his tenure, Phillips was transferred, against his wishes, to the Israel Metropolitan Church in Washington,

7. Phillips, *History of the C.M.E.*, 51; interviews with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn and Professor O. T. Peeples.

8. *Christian Index*, 10 November 1888.

D.C. Yet for all this, oral tradition insists that the C.M.E. Collins Chapel was extremely reluctant ever to accept a dark minister.⁹

The genteel culture of house servants—their concern with education, manners, and respectability—appears in any case to have been valued more highly than a light skin in the early C.M.E. Church. The first pair of church bishops had both been house servants and so apparently were the members of Collins Chapel who disdained the unrestrained Afro-American religious tradition of worship. White observers spoke approvingly of the dignified congregation at Collins Chapel while condemning the wild enthusiasm at the local Avery Chapel, A.M.E.—where “lungs, like a black-smith’s bellows seemed to be the *sine qua non* of an efficient exhorter.”¹⁰ Avery Chapel celebrated not only with screaming sermons but with all night religious dancing. In the early morning hours the congregation could still be seen gathered in its hand-clapping, foot-stamping ring, a West African religious ritual which continued to excite individual Afro-Americans, usually women, who felt themselves seized by the spirit and thrown into frenzied dancing within the ring until they finally collapsed in a faint. At this point the group might move in around their fallen sister and chant in heavy African rhythms:

Go to him, sister
For Jesus died for you
For you, my sister
For you, my sister
Jesus died for you.¹¹

9. Charles Henry Phillips, *From the Farm to the Bishopric: An Autobiography* (Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1932), 70-71.

10. *Daily Appeal*, 30 August 1872.

11. *Daily Avalanche*, 10 May 1878; What the white journalist reported as a “wild heathenish jig,” was clearly the African phenomenon of religious possession described by Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 215-218.

The chanting group even had prayers for those who had fallen asleep in the chapel, and they often went from one to another singing:

Go to de Lord, brudder
Go ter de Lord

Satan is beat yer, is torn yer,
is kicked yer, and yet yer struggles,
don't yer my brudder?

Although an A.M.E. bishop once decried what he called these "corn field ditties" and this "heathenish way to worship,"¹² ring dancing and chanting were an essential part of religion for the black masses and almost universally practiced by the Baptists and Methodists. In Memphis the A.M.E. continued to dance and sing, while the Collins Chapel congregation never allowed such ungentle conduct.

C.M.E. members argued that since jumping and shouting marked the style of black religion practiced under slavery, they were inappropriate and inadmissible to a congregation of freedmen. The old ritual was considered the product of black people's oppression:

... their only consolation was their religious hope as expressed in weird, heart-moving plantation melodies and in those peculiarly moving mourns, sighs and shouts which had the merit of sincere spiritual longing for a better home than their unhappy earthly lot. A sermon by one of themselves in their broken and untutored way could have consisted of little else than their crude ideas and vivid imaginings concerning heaven as contrasted with their experience of earth. No wonder such remembrances called forth

12. Smith, *History of the A.M.E.*, 126-127.

strong emotion in piteous sighs and wailing moans, or that the slightest reference to heaven and its glories set them wild with shouts of ecstasy. Their unhappy surroundings and untutored minds asked nothing but opposite pictures to comfort them.¹³

Now that they were all free sons of God, blacks should take better spiritual food, conducting themselves in worship with the solemnity and eloquence becoming them.

The Collins Chapel congregation earned the reputation of being the "most refined and quiet large congregation in the city."¹⁴ It might have been mistaken for the smaller Congregational or Episcopal memberships, had it not been for its massive members; for even its revivals were restrained. Even when, as a church correspondent once reported, protracted meetings had brought in one hundred and thirty new members for Collins Chapel, the revivals "were not permitted to go on longer than half past ten; they were not the scenes of wild excitement, but carried on spiritually and intelligently; free from those meaningless 'jump up' songs, as good old spiritual hymns were mostly sung."¹⁵ In short, the Collins congregation represented a blending of the genteel servant tradition with the aspirations of the new middle class. The school teachers, postal employees, attorneys, medical doctors, and socially ambitious expected their ministers to deliver "plain and practical" sermons on the local and temporal, as well as the eternal. A congregation willing to trade in all the shouting in the world for a little practical Christianity heard the minister say that a real Christian supported his family, bought property, educated his children, paid his debts, and voted on principle. The ladies of the church wanted to be told that a woman who beautified her home, saved her husband's money, taught her children good manners, and did not slander her neighbor stood "a far

13. *Christian Index*, 10 March 1888.

14. *Ibid.*, 9 November 1889.

15. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1888.

better chance of getting into heaven than the sister in the amen corner who shouts the loudest."¹⁶

If Collins Chapel in Memphis had been a typical C.M.E. congregation, then the denomination would never have surpassed the local A.M.E. which appealed both to the black middle class and the masses. But as it happened, the C.M.E. was a church of the people in the small towns and the backcountry of Tennessee and Mississippi where it competed successfully with the Baptists, while the A.M.E. had never developed congregations in the small towns of the Mid-South at all. When the migration to the city began, the C.M.E. would begin to catch up in Memphis. In 1900 they were behind with three congregations to seven for the A.M.E. Ten years later they had expanded to six Memphis congregations while the A.M.E. had only grown to eight. It was the rural folk, and not the Collins Chapel elite, who moved the C.M.E. ahead in the number of local Methodist congregations and memberships.¹⁷ The Collins people suffered from segregation in a racist city and they longed for a better day; but they were not representative of the poor and dark skinned masses. Their problems were those of an urban middle class, and they sought articulate, educated clergy to relate to their special needs.

16. *Ibid.*, 12 May 1888, 9 November 1889, 2 May 1891.

17. Interview with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, 9 February 1972; R. L. Polk, *Memphis City Directory 1900* (Memphis: Polk Publishing Company, 1900), 89; *Memphis City Directory 1910*; while the C.M.E. pulled ahead of the A.M.E. locally, nationally the C.M.E. had only 203,000 to the A.M.E. 546,000, U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States 1920-1932* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), 532.

3

The Churches and Secret Societies

The secret society was the church's most formidable organized competitor in soliciting the participation and financial support of the black community. Although the roots of the benevolent and fraternal societies, like those of the church, could be traced back to West Africa where secret groups had been common, the more immediate American influence was the dominant one. Even before the Civil War, free blacks had their own Social and Benevolent Society, and after Memphis became a Union city in 1862, black fraternal orders of the Masons, Odd Fellows, and countless local mutual-aid organizations multiplied rapidly.¹

Memphis freedmen founded secret societies in even greater numbers than they organized Christian churches. More than

1. The Social and Benovolent Society, the earliest local lodge, was organized in 1854, *Memphis Daily Post*, 26 August 1867.

thirty-one local lodges were formed within a single ten-year period, bearing such varied designations as the Sons of Ham, Daughters of Zion, Christian Relief Society, Mechanics Benevolent Association, Union Forever Society, Independent Order of Pole Bearers, Mutual Relief Society, Draymen's Association, Gymnastic Society, Sisters of Lincoln Relief Society, Laborers Union, Israelites Society, and the Jerusalem Society.² Complete with secret passwords, ingenious handshakes, and exotic regalia, these societies provided an exclusive social life for their members. There was a continuous round of regular parties and public celebrations not only on all the national holidays, but on special black anniversaries such as Emancipation Day (January 1) and the day the U.S. Army captured Memphis (June 6). The more elaborate celebrations always began with festive parades down Main Street followed, in the summer, by picnics and Republican speeches at Mrs. Dennison's Grove, and in winter, by buffets and oratory inside fraternal halls or church buildings.³

At the same time, the societies had certain benevolent functions. Members were fond of pointing out that while the church was trying to get a man into heaven, the lodge was making his life a little easier on earth by sitting up with his sick and paying the doctor bills. At the close of the Civil War these Memphis organizations were already spending three thousand dollars a year on medical and funeral expenses, and by the seventies they had more than doubled their expenditures for this charitable work.⁴

Beyond this, the fraternal orders assumed a leading political role in their community. After 1867, when black Memphians were given the vote, the societies began to work with the Republican Loyal League and became effective political clubs. They

2. *Ibid.*, 6 July 1869; *Memphis Daily Appeal*, 23 March, 9 June 1874.

3. *Daily Post*, 21 May, 6 July 1866, 2 January, 5 July 1867.

4. John T. Trowbridge, *The Desolate South 1865-1866; A Picture of the Battlefields and of the Devastated Confederacy*, ed. Gordon Carroll (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1956), 179.

listened to speakers, debated the issues, and then got out the black vote. The control black lodges had in the political realm is indicated by the absolute effect of their shift in strategy: when the societies advocated militancy, blacks were elected to city hall; and after the fraternal leaders moved to accommodation tactics, in 1874, black office holders could not find the black votes they needed for reelection. The history of how this strategical shift developed is revealing. Initially the fraternal orders and the black voters were willing to support white candidates born in the North for all the local offices. After all, it had been northern Republicans who put an end to slavery; the local teachers in the missionary schools and the officials of the Freedmen's Bureau also came from the North. Then, too, when a black wanted to read about his race in a local newspaper, he bought the *Memphis Post*, which was edited by a former Yankee officer. The two other *Memphis* papers, edited by local white Democrats, rarely carried news of Negro churches and fraternities and ignored all black achievements, though always reporting black crime. It was only natural that northern born whites should be taken as friends by the blacks, and that the lodges should work to secure the election of these friends.⁵ But with time individual blacks began to demand their fair share of the political pie; and none in the Negro community was more vocal than Ed Shaw. Born in the midwest, Shaw had moved to Memphis as a free man in the 1850s, and after the war ran a saloon and gambling hall on Linden. He was an articulate and forceful orator, noted, according to the local press, "for his ultra and bitter speeches, inciting the Negroes against the whites, and in denunciation of democracy and democrats."⁶ Shaw often spoke before the Sons of Ham and the Independent Order of Pole Bearers but seems not have been an officer of either

5. Ernest W. Hooper, "Memphis, Tennessee: Federal Occupation and Reconstruction 1862-1870," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1957), 170-174.

6. *Memphis Daily Avalanche*, 13 July 1867; *Memphis Appeal-Avalanche*, 11 March 1891.

lodge; his ambitions lay elsewhere, in city politics; and he began his political career by first attacking local white Democrats, and soon even his white Republican friends.

Shaw's militancy began when he discovered the racial prejudice among white Republicans during his campaign bid for the Shelby County Commission in 1869. Word came to him that General W. J. Smith, a local Republican, was opposing his election, and when he checked into the story, he was told by Smith's brother-in-law, "He likes you as well as anybody else, but he don't think a nigger should run for office."⁷ Deeply embittered, Shaw decided to even the score when Smith campaigned for Congress in 1870. Shaw organized opposition against the General by entering the race for Congress himself, as an independent, and making Smith his favorite whipping boy. Shaw reminded the local black Republicans of the racism and ingratitude of the white party leaders. "We want to teach them," he said, "that they must vote for a nigger."⁸ He accused Smith of personal corruption, of accepting a \$5,000 bribe from the Memphis Street Railway Company and in return voting to raise fares from five to ten cents. He noted with irony that the General claimed to have sacrificed himself in the war for the black man's freedom. It was interesting, Shaw thought, that the General could go into the war a poor man, and sacrifice so much that he came out worth \$100,000. Neither the General nor even Abraham Lincoln had fought to liberate the slaves, Shaw added. "Now by the Chicago platform," he said, "the war was only to prevent the extension of slavery, and it is well known that in one of Abraham Lincoln's proclamations he said that if the rebels would lay down their arms he would give them back their fugitive slaves. It was God who liberated the slaves, and it was only a war measure; an incident of the war."⁹

Blacks applauded Ed Shaw's attacks and enjoyed the humor with which he spoke of his own "military record." "I have not a

7. *Daily Avalanche*, 6 October 1870.

8. *Ibid.*, 27 September 1870.

9. *Ibid.*, 6 October 1870.

good war record," he confessed. "The first reason I had for not going into the army was that they told me it was a white man's fight and they did not want Negroes, and it was, therefore, easy for me to step out. The first the Negroes were put into the war was as slaves, and I did not go in. Another thing, they did not allow promotion among the colored soldiers, and I did not want any fighting on that plan. Another reason was that there was killing going on, and . . . I was afraid I might get shot. [loud cheers and laughter]"¹⁰ Although Ed Shaw himself was unable to get elected to Congress—he received less than 200 votes—he was instrumental in General Smith's defeat by a white Democrat, and thus took satisfaction in having taught white Republicans a lesson: they could not win without cooperating with blacks and treating them as equals. Black Memphians, now sensitized to the slightest prejudicial or patronizing behavior, refused to endorse any white Republican candidates who would not submit themselves to a public interrogation at the Sons of Ham hall. In a manner which whites regarded as "cool and insolent," blacks required candidates to renounce formally all racism and endorse Senator Sumner's supplementary civil rights bill for integrating all public facilities, including the schools.¹¹

Ed Shaw came out strongly for integration: "When the Irishman or the German comes to this country, his children are admitted to the schools the very next day after they land, while the children of us native Americans are not allowed to enter them, but are set apart, are tabooed and ostracised."¹² When whites expressed fear that the civil rights bill would lead to social equality, Shaw pointed out to his black brothers and sisters that white men had been practicing equality in black bedrooms more often than blacks in white ones. Once, when addressing the society of Pole Bearers he glanced over the audience and remarked:

10. *Ibid.*, 25 October 1870.

11. *Daily Appeal*, 28 June 1872.

12. *Ibid.*, 27 June 1872.

"They say, 'Oh! You want to marry our daughters.' From the looks of this congregation it seems that one could hardly marry any other than their daughter!"

With their strong endorsement of equality and the civil rights bill, Shaw and the fraternal orders were able to win city offices. In 1972 two blacks became members of the city council, and their number on the council doubled the following year. Two years later blacks joined an ethnic coalition of Irish and Italians, and were able to take all of city hall from the Anglo-Southerners. Ed Shaw was elected wharfmaster and six blacks were put on the city council.¹³

Ironically Negro Memphians had no sooner achieved real political power than the black fraternal orders abandoned the militancy on which their politicians had ridden into office. In part, fear of white violence is what turned the fraternal leadership around. The black community had not forgotten the riots eight years before, in which whites had burned every local black church and killed more than forty Negroes. Then, in the summer of 1874, a riot scare swept the city after whites learned that the Pole Bearers had exchanged their marching sticks for rifles and held armed drills at night. Even though the rented rifles were unloaded and without percussion caps, white anger caused the Negro leadership to abandon the activity and assume a less aggressive posture generally.¹⁴

This abdication of the militant role was the result of not only the city's near riot but of the whole trend of recent events. The collapse of the Freedmen's Saving and Trust Company in September, 1873, had undermined much of the blacks' confidence in the Republican party. White Republicans had urged the Negro

13. *Daily Avalanche*, 5 January 1872, 3 January 1873, 3 January 1874.

14. *Ibid.*, 7, 9 June 1874; the white riots of 1866 had burned every local black church and killed more than forty blacks; U.S. Congress, *Report on Memphis Riots and Massacres* 39th Cong. 1st sess. H. rpt. 101, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1866), 21, 35.

community to deposit their capital in the bank where accounts were said to be safely in the hands of the federal government. So it was to be expected that when the Beale Street branch declared bankruptcy and wiped out the people's savings, the Republican party was held responsible. Republicans were also denounced for defrauding blacks by failing to carry out the promise of "forty acres and a mule," and for failing to pass Sumner's civil rights bill. Finally, when the Republicans lost control of Congress in the fall election of 1874, Memphis blacks understood this to mean that Reconstruction had come to an end. Conservative fraternal leaders thus urged their race to divorce the Republicans and ally with local white Democrats, the true friends of black people.

A dozen fraternity leaders, three of whom were also ministers, issued a public statement on 9 December 1874 resolving to break with the GOP, eschew political involvement altogether, and seek the friendship of southern whites.

We, the undersigned presidents of colored societies in the city of Memphis, having at heart the well-being of our race, and feeling with them our deplorable condition as a plundered and much-abused people, regret that we are compelled to record the fact that, after these long years of citizenship, and without evil intent on our part, we find ourselves as a people involved in suicidal strife, estranged from our best interests, and in most bitter antagonistic relation to the true people of the south—the owners of the soil—through whom alone we could only hope for prosperity in this section of country. We are fully aroused to the consciousness that we have been for years the dupes of crafty, designing, unprincipled men, whose only object was their own personal aggrandizement, irrespective of the means, or the results to our injury. They have shorn us of our pecuniary accumulations, the result of our weary years of toil, even to the pennies accumulated by our youth and little fledglings. All this we could bear, but they have left us

despised by our only true friends, through their knavish representations and unmitigated falsehoods.¹⁵

Typifying the blacks' new courtship of southern whites were the efforts of Hezekiah Henley, president of the Pole Bearers. Henley, a blacksmith who owned his own shop, repeatedly expressed his grief at seeing white and black men turn against each other. "Harmony and good will must prevail between the people of my color and the whites," Henley said, "else our children will remain uneducated, our young men fail to become skilled mechanics or masters of useful professions, and finally sink into a dangerous lethargy, that will take them to the doors of vagabondage, idleness and crime. I want to see schools filled with our children, competing with the children of the whites in the race for knowledge, competing with the whites in mechanics and in the professions."¹⁶ As president of the Pole Bearers, Henley had sufficient influence to promote effectively racial understanding. He organized an ambitious fifth of July celebration for 1875, at the City Fair Grounds, to dramatize racial unity. Former Confederate generals, Nathan Bedford Forrest and G. J. Pillow, were featured speakers, and as a gesture "of reconciliation, and an offering of peace and good will," President Henley had a beautiful light-skinned Negro, Miss Lou Lewis, present a bouquet of flowers to General Forrest.¹⁷

Forrest took the flowers gallantly with a bow and said, "Miss Lewis, ladies and gentlemen—I accept these flowers as a token of reconciliation between the white and colored races of the South. I accept them more particularly, since they come from a lady, for if there is any man on God's green earth who loves the ladies, it is myself." Forrest went on to say that he had been maligned and misunderstood by the black race. He was their friend and would

15. *Daily Appeal*, 9 December 1874.

16. *Ibid.*, 25 July 1875.

17. *Daily Avalanche*, 6 July 1875.

help them whenever he could. "I want to elevate every man, and to see you take your places in your shops, stores and offices," Forrest said. "I assure you that every man who was in the Confederate Army is your friend. We were born on the same soil, breathe the same air, live on the same land, and why should we not be brothers and sisters?"¹⁸

Although the blacks had taken the initiative in reconciliation, nothing could have been more to the liking of the Anglo-Southerners in Memphis who had much to gain by bridging the racial hostilities, as their newspaper had frequently pointed out. After the city election of 1874, the *Memphis Appeal* carried one white's opinion that 'in the last municipal election the Irish voter had exhibited no repugnance to 'clasp hands over the bloody chasm' with sambo, when an office was to be retained or obtained thereby. Then why should the American of the South longer hesitate to strengthen his power by an alliance with him? What Pat can do surely the late master can accomplish."¹⁹ The Fair Grounds celebration was just what the local Democratic masters wanted, and after July 5, they gave Henley their enthusiastic support.

In the next municipal election, Hezekiah Henley convinced more than half the black electorate to abandon Negro candidates for an entire slate of southern whites, and the Democratic press was elated: "The colored people of Memphis," the *Appeal* announced, "forever buried their antagonism to the whites. They sank race prejudices in a noble desire to promote the great material interests of Memphis." The *Appeal* also indicated the decline of Ed Shaw's influence in his community by quoting a black voter who had announced on Election day: "Ed Shaw done popped de last whip ober dis chile: I dun cut loose now. . . ." ²⁰

In effect, the election of 1876 ended an era of black protest and began the erosion of black political power. The fraternal leaders believed they could seek peace and harmony with the

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Daily Appeal*, 7 January 1874.

20. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1876.

whites, without compromising the cause of equality or sacrificing their manhood. Neither Henley nor any other black leader ever went so far as to suggest that his race should surrender their political rights, and the local white Democrats did not take steps immediately to stop Negroes from holding public office. Still, only an occasional black was then elected to city government, and after 1886 Memphis city hall was closed to all Negro politicians. Thus racial accommodation proved less than successful in realizing the goals of equality and manhood, and turned out to be the black leadership's own undoing.

As black society leaders lost the respect of the community—who watched with dismay as their spokesmen stripped themselves of all power in city hall—the fraternal orders also declined in prestige. In this weakened position the societies faced a challenge from their natural rivals, the clergy, who had long resented the growing competition for the support of the masses. When the slaves were first freed, the church had easily held the advantage over the lodge, but growing secularization of the race had made the fraternity a serious rival of the church in the appeal for the money and attention of the masses.²¹ Inevitably this competition between the two camps for black leadership sparked a community crisis.

Many ministers actually held membership in the societies, and occasionally even an office. But, as one would expect, the clergymen often felt morally compromised by fraternity socials where whisky and gambling were regular attractions. Nor could they approve the circus-like fraternal funerals, whose showy brass bands and gaily uniformed processions drew to the interments at Zion Cemetery great hordes of curious, unregenerate loafers.²² As an unhealthy secular influence, and a formidable competitor for the allegiance and resources of the community, the powerful fraternal orders eventually became the principal target of a crusade by hostile members of the clergy.

21. *Christian Index*, 16 February 1889.

22. *Daily Appeal*, 1 August 1885.

Reverend R. N. Countee led the opposition to the secret societies. After a scandalous tenure as pastor of Beale Street Baptist Church—from which he was forced to resign in 1882, when he was found to be having an affair with a parishioner—Countee founded Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church, and quickly made it the center of the secret society controversy. One Friday night in late July 1885 the minister had taken part in a general anti-fraternal debate in the Memphis Lyceum, and in church the following Sunday he renounced his allegiance to all the societies to which he had belonged—Masons, Knights of Pythias, Odd Fellows, Immaculates, and Knights of Labor—and he urged his people to do likewise. Countee declared that the money his people put into fraternities should be given instead to the church which could doctor its own sick and bury its own dead more economically than could the lodges. For just twenty-five cents a month and an annual payment of one dollar—much less than what most of the members were spending on their numerous societies—they could build a benevolent fund for the entire congregation.²³

At the next weekly Memphis Lyceum, continued debate on the secret societies nearly turned into a riot when Reverend B. A. Imes of the Second Congregational Church began reading from a manuscript which revealed the secrets of the Masons. Members of the audience rushed from their seats and confiscated Reverend Imes' papers, shouting accusations that ex-Mason Countee had given the information to Imes. The allegation was renewed after the next weekly issue of *Living Way*—the Baptist paper which Countee just happened to serve as business manager—carried an article by Imes which further exposed the inner sanctum of Masonry. Almost at once, Reverend Countee's life was threatened publicly by Captain R. T. Brown, a barber and commander of the local Negro militia, who warned that if Imes wrote anything more the Tabernacle Church would need a new minis-

23. James T. Haley, *Afro-American Encyclopedia* (Nashville: J. T. Haley & Co., 1895), 417-418; *Daily Appeal*, 18 March, 5 August 1885.

ter. Then shortly before 3 A.M. on the morning of August 3, a mob of more than thirty blacks surrounded Countee's house. The minister opened fire with his Smith & Wesson five-shooter, but was forced to retreat when the mob returned fire with a heavy volley through the front door. Leaping out the back, clad only in his night shirt, Countee sprang over the fence and through the bayou, making his escape to a friend's house on Clay Street where he spent the remainder of the night. When he returned, he found pinned to the door a letter conveying the people's sentiments:

My dear Broth R. N. Countee

You must be made bie man kind to stop working the worke of mane kind hear on Earth for you time is growing short Every day for you ar a lier to God—a lier to Man—for you did promis God thate you woulde do his will to all mane kind But in stid of doing his will you ar doing the devils will and you tole a nother lie to you Brother in the body for whare you tuck the oath of obligation that you woode note Reveil the secre of Mason you promis that you suffear you throughte cut from are to are so you have tole a lie ale Round so you are nothin But a lier and not fitten to call youself a gide post for the pepill to go by. We thinkd you was a smarter man than that. You call you selft a smarte man But now you have gone and do some-thin that was not smarte a nuff. When you want to give away the masonics you the Damist fool that Ever Dide. You try to Bee smarte. You are samethinge like the old deveil whare the went to cast him oute of heven he brought his tail around the third part of heaven and tore it A loose. So that is you to Day, you little Black Raskel so you be done in the same way . . . I give 3 days to you to leave Memphis . . . so Look oute all feller we will kotch you firste thing you know you will Bee a Dead man for we will have you shorter than you expeact. So the Best thing you kinde do is to leave Memphis and note to pute yo fete back a gain. And it is Best for you to change you name where

ever you go for you have the hole Unite States to containe with now so donte you know thate whare you give Away the secread of Mason that you had Better Bine in the mideil of the Miss River with a Mill Stone A Rounde you neck and to Give away the Secret odders so my fiend you had bettear Leave Mempis as soon as you kind.²⁴

In alarm, the Reverend sought to reassure black Memphis Masonry that it had never been he who exposed their secrets. The Chicago-based Anti-Secret Society, said Countee, in a meeting with a Masonic delegation, had in fact been the source of Reverend Imes' information. Countee repeatedly stated that he still felt honor bound to guard the society secrets, and that he felt free only from fraternity membership.²⁵ Although the committee of Masons was reported satisfied with Countee's explanation, local authorities took the precaution of assigning a special guard of ten sheriff's deputies to protect Countee's home for the next sixty days.²⁶ Nevertheless, in his own congregation, Reverend Countee endeavored to exclude all those who retained memberships in the lodges, and in so doing became the second local pastor to make this renunciation of secret societies a requirement for church membership.

Reverend W. A. Brinkley, pastor of Washington Street Baptist Church and editor of the *Living Way*, had also decided that the lodge was no place for a Christian. On the night of July 22, Brinkley had interrupted the regular order of his church services to read aloud the list of church members and ask each if he or she belonged to any secret organization. Those who acknowledged such membership were given the chance to renounce it; the sixty-eight who refused to do so were removed from the membership roll.²⁷

24. *Daily Appeal*, 5 August 1885.

25. *Ibid.*, 7 August 1885.

26. *Daily Avalanche*, 24 January 1886.

27. *Daily Appeal*, 1 August 1885.

Brinkley's move really seems to have been impelled by the church's financial troubles. Not long before, the congregation's old building had been destroyed by fire and Brinkley was forced to borrow more than \$5,000 to replace it. Church collections for the building fund, however, had failed to keep up with the notes, and Brinkley had no other choice but to use part of his salary to make the payments. The congregation was soon \$350 in debt to their pastor and this became the object of divisive financial sermonizing. Since the older church members were generally reliable contributors while the younger society men were less dependable and less generous, Reverend Brinkley placed the blame for his trouble on the immoral influence of the lodges. For more than a month Brinkley preached against the fraternal orders, taking as armament texts from Matthew and Corinthians, and launching full attacks against the adversary.²⁸ But much to the pastor's disappointment, the sermons only escalated the conflict without bringing victory. Society members reacted defensively and the church became so divided that Brinkley saw no alternative but to let his congregation choose between excluding society members and accepting his resignation. Fortunately for him, the fraternity faction failed to win a majority, and Brinkley evicted the group from his Washington Street Church.

There was little support for Brinkley and Countee in the highest circles of Negro society, where most thought that "the best men" held membership in a lodge, and that the anti-society preachers had acted only from "personal spite."²⁹ Nor did the Memphis pastors have the support of the lower class urban blacks, or even the encouragement of a majority of the Memphis clergy. Only where the societies were weaker, among the rural

28. The texts were: Matthew 5:13-16, 6:19-21,24, 10:37-38, 12:30, 19:29, Corinthians 6:11-18, Ephesians 5:7-12, and Malachi 3:8-11.

29. *Cleveland Gazette*, 14 November 1885; W. W. Mallory to Reverend M. E. Streiby, 23 October 1878, American Missionary Association Archives (Armistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans).

and small-town West Tennessee Baptist preachers, were they able to make any inroads. Rural Baptists had much respect for the two ministers who published the religious weekly, the *Living Way*. Better educated than most of the rural Baptists, Countee and Brinkley were admired for their biblical scholarship and followed readily when, in 1888, they organized the Memphis Baptist Bible and Normal Institute for West Tennessee Baptists. Brinkley and Countee sat on the board of directors and saw to it that secret society members, along with drinking men and smokers, were barred from teaching at the school, and thereby institutionalized the fight against fraternal orders.³⁰

Though the Baptist Bible and Normal Institute was the object of bitter hostility from the Negro population for many years afterwards, it survived and became the major Negro Baptist school for West Tennessee, with the enthusiastic endorsement of many whites. The Institute founders had shrewdly designed a curriculum which combined academic, religious, and industrial training, and therefore had a wide appeal. Northern white Baptists supported the school because its first presidents were white ministers from the North; and white Southern Baptists recommended the Institute because the ministerial classes were lectured to by five of their own clergy. Memphis whites approved the practical industrial training—sewing, dress-making, and nursing for girls, carpentry, brick laying, painting, and forgework for boys—and they applauded the moral and religious instruction provided.

Cooperation between the local white power elite and black ministers, for the support of Howe, as the Institute came to be called after its largest donor, would continue over the years, accruing to the ministers important white contacts and greater prestige in the community.³¹ Indeed, the fraternal controversy,

30. *Daily Appeal*, 16 April, 30 June 1880; T. O. Fuller, *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee* (Memphis: Haskins Printers, 1936), 118-122; *Baptist Home Mission Monthly* XII (June 1890), 104-105.

31. *Daily Avalanche*, 27 May 1890.

in part, can be read as a movement among the better educated clergymen to gain secular power. No longer able to divorce themselves from social and economic problems, young ministers like R. N. Countee and W. A. Brinkley competed with the secret societies and politicians in the arena of civic leadership, and by the 1890s the black clergy had emerged as the leading spokesmen, while the fraternities, though never dying out altogether, became fewer and less influential in the community.

Reverend Benjamin Albert Imes and the Crisis of the Nineties

One of the young black clergy who emerged as a community spokesman in the eighteen-eighties was the Reverend Benjamin Imes, the best educated minister in all the Bluff City. Born in Pennsylvania of free black parents in 1848, he spent ten years at Oberlin earning degrees from the college and seminary. After his graduation in 1880, he was sent by the American Missionary Association to their Memphis mission, Second Congregational Church, which had never become financially independent in its twelve years under white ministers. While Reverend Imes turned his mission church into an entirely self-supporting congregation, he also spoke out on civic issues and became a major voice for his community.¹

1. William Lloyd Imes, *The Black Pastures* (Nashville: Hemphill Press, 1957), 1-6.

During his first years in Memphis, Reverend Imes often shared his American dream of the time when race and color would no longer handicap his people. The current prejudice of whites, he said, was already motivating black people to prove themselves of equal worth, and as they competed they developed greater courage, education, and industry within the race. Now that they were free they could demonstrate their capacity for high endeavor; they could prove their worth and justify their freedom and their right to complete equality. "The colored people mean to be men," Imes stoutly declared.²

The Reverend's forecast of racial equality proved a bit too benign. The cause stopped moving forward, and even began to regress, when in 1883 the U. S. Supreme Court declared Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Law unconstitutional. This reversal embittered clergymen such as Atlanta's A.M.E. Bishop Henry M. Turner, who told the *Memphis Appeal* the Constitution was now "a dirty rag, a cheat, a libel, and ought to be spit upon by every Negro in the land."³ Reverend Imes, however, was more moderate in his protest and chose instead to join educational and professional leaders of the community in a public expression of regret. The court decision now prevented any legal redress when black Americans were denied equal access to hotels, restaurants, first class railroad cars, and theatres, and Imes, with his fellow leaders, first called for Tennessee legislation to repeal local discrimination, and then suggested a new constitutional amendment on the national level to overrule the Supreme Court defense of segregation.⁴

Even while working to achieve integration, Reverend Imes sought to reassure whites who feared social equality. Insisting that social equality and civil rights were two different issues, Imes argued, as Senator Sumner had, that those who shared public

2. *Memphis Appeal*, 6 April 1881.

3. *Ibid.*, 8 November 1883.

4. *Ibid.*, 3 November 1883.

facilities were still masters of their own homes and private lives. This was already the way things were in Memphis, Imes pointed out: "Whites and blacks work together in various callings; serve on school boards, the police force, and in government office. They ride in streetcars and omnibuses . . . and go their separate ways, the social relations of each being regulated by altogether another line of things."⁵ Black men sought only equality of public privilege, not social equality; the latter, Imes stressed, was something which could never be legislated and would best be left alone to work itself out. On the other hand, segregation laws which denied blacks civil equality were grossly unfair and unchristian. "Christianity does not make men socially equals," the minister explained, "when they are naturally unequal, but Christianity is a great leveler on the ground of just recognition of claims and duties of a common manhood." Although racial prejudices might not be easily eradicated, and segregated schools and churches might long resist integration, Imes insisted that Christians would have to stop letting racial lines divide them. "A church which makes caste distinctions in ecclesiastical relations, or in the worship of God," he told Memphis whites in 1887, "thereby forfeits its right to be called a church of Jesus in Christ."⁶

Despite Imes' efforts on behalf of integration, white sentiment actually moved rapidly in the very opposite direction. Where Memphis Negroes had for twenty years been able to vote, hold public office, and serve on the city police force, the new generation of white Memphians were launching a campaign to end Negro participation in politics and to reestablish white supremacy. "The older men have been contemplating the situation for, lo these many years," the young white editor of the *Memphis Weekly Avalanche* wrote. "They've been saying, 'If the North will let us alone, we'll work this out in time.' The time for that sort of talk has gone by. The young men of today say, 'We are

5. *Ibid.*, 16 January 1885.

6. *Ibid.*, 16 July 1887.

going to work this out, and do it right now . . . and the North can do all the howling it wants to.”⁷

The determination of these young white racists to overthrow Reconstruction was met by a militant reaction from the black community, led by Reverend Taylor Nightingale, a quick-tempered, Old Testament pastor of Beale Street Baptist. Nightingale had begun his ministry Back in Virginia the year after the close of the Civil War, but had frequently dabbled in secular pursuits such as the study of medicine.⁸ He had earned the reputation of being something of a militant when he alone among the ministers purchased a repeating Winchester rifle for the self-defense movement which developed in the black community during the hotly contested presidential election of 1888. Determined that the clergy should be the political leaders of the race, Nightingale took an active role in Republican politics, and published *Free Speech and Headlight*, a militant weekly edited in his Beale Street Church. Protest editorials, written by associate editors J. L. Fleming and Miss Ida B. Wells, were angry and to the point:

The dailies of our city say that the whites must rule this country. But that is an expression without a thought. It must be borne in mind that the Lord is going to have something to say about this and all other government. It may be expected that the black man will press his claim “till Shiloh comes.”

The old Southern voice that was once heard and made the Negroes jump and run like rats to their holes is “shut up,” or might well be, for the Negro of today is not the same as Negroes were thirty years ago, and it can’t be expected that the Negro of today will take what was forced

7. *Memphis Weekly Avalanche*, 11 July 1889.

8. G. P. Hamilton, *The Bright Side of Memphis* (Memphis: A. E. Clark & Son, 1908), 138-139.

9. *Weekly Avalanche*, 13 June 1889.

upon him thirty years back. So it is no use to be talking now about Negroes ought to be kept at the bottom where God intended for them to stay; the Negro is not expected to stay at the bottom.⁹

The *Free Speech* editorials were taken as evidence of the folly of educating black men and held up as proof of the perfidity of black ministers. Since the newspaper was edited and sold in the Beale Street Church, white Memphians assumed Reverend Nightingale was instilling the doctrine of hate, not the gospel of love, in the minds of the rising generation of blacks. The whites were particularly outraged by a *Free Speech* editorial supporting retaliatory violence:

Those Georgetown, Ky., Negroes who set fire to the town last week because a Negro named Dudley had been lynched, show some of the true spark of manhood by their resentment. We had begun to think the Negroes of Jackson and Tullahoma, Tenn., of Forest City, Ark., and nearly the whole state of Mississippi, where lynching of Negroes has become the sport and pastime of unknown (?) white citizens, hadn't manhood enough in them to wriggle and crawl out of the way, much less protect and defend themselves. Of one thing we may be assured, so long as we permit ourselves to be trampled upon, so long we will have to endure it. Not until the Negro rises in his might and takes a hand in resenting such cold-blooded murders, if he has to burn up whole towns, will a halt be called in whole-sale lynching.¹⁰

In reply, the outraged white Memphis press penned a justification of lynching. Though mob law was in violation of the written code, the *Appeal-Avalanche* pointed out, "Rev. Nightingale

10. *Ibid.*, 6 September 1891.

should reflect that there is a higher law" which provided that "the rapist must pay the penalty with his life."¹¹ This higher legislation superseded all other because the people willed it and "at such times they, the law-makers, rise above all law." After the white press had set the Reverend Nightingale straight on the legitimacy of lynching and rigorously condemned him for publishing such a "vile, incendiary and murder-applauding article," the civil authorities stepped in to force the minister out of the city. By exploiting a feud within Nightingale's church in which thirteen ousted members of the congregation brought assault and battery charges against the pastor, the Memphis authorities were able to convict the preacher in the criminal court. Sentenced to eighty days in the county workhouse, Nightingale fled to Oklahoma,¹² but the good reverend's expulsion hardly affected the city's militant black journalism, since Fleming and Miss Wells continued to write the paper's protest columns, just as they had been doing all along.

Serious racial trouble erupted the following spring in South Memphis, on the curve of Walker Avenue and Mississippi Boulevard, where a black cooperative grocery had begun to draw business away from a white store across the street. Competition led to physical violence, which the white merchant seems to have incited, and three officials of the black Peoples' Grocery Store were placed under arrest. Four days after the arrest, at three o'clock in the morning, nine white men, apparently deputy sheriffs, entered the county jail, seized the three prisoners and shot them in cold blood a mile north of the jail.¹³

11. *Ibid.*

12. Memphis *Appeal-Avalanche*, 10, 11, 13 September 1891; Memphis *Public Ledger*, 28, 30 October, 2 November 1891.

13. Fred L. Hutchins, *What Happened in Memphis* (Memphis: Fred L. Hutchins, 1965), 36-40; Nashville *Daily American*, 7 March 1892; *Appeal-Avalanche*, 16 March 1892; the most persuasive statement of facts was assembled by five black clergymen and published in the St. Paul *Appeal*, 26 March 1892; David M. Tucker, "Miss Ida B. Wells and Memphis Lynching," *Phylon* XXXIII (Summer 1971), 112-122.

Three black men were thus lynched in a city of over 85,000 and without the remotest chance that the murderers would ever be brought to trial. Appalled by this, the worst atrocity against them since the Memphis police riot of 1866, the black community turned out by the thousands for the largest funeral procession ever to have taken place in Memphis. Resolutions condemning the lynchings and recommending emigration were adopted at a black town meeting; and the cries of "On to Oklahoma," which had already been heard for several years, sent wagon trains with hundreds of people west across the Mississippi River, and over the Old Military Road.

The clergy took an active role in the exodus. Reverend W. A. Brinkley left his editorship of the *Living Way*, sold his Washington Street Baptist Church to the local Jewish community, and moved his congregation west to Stockton, California. Reverend R. N. Countee moved to Wichita, Kansas; Reverend W. F. H. Morgan to Guthrie and Reverend J. L. Lee to Langston, Oklahoma. As many as two thousand black Memphians may have followed the ministers from the city, not only in search of freedom for their children, but with the vague hope that by depopulating the area whites would regret their violent oppression of black people.

Characteristically, Reverend Imes chose a less extreme form of protest. In the days immediately following the lynching, he joined W. A. Brinkley, R. N. Countee, and the pastors of Avery Chapel and Collins Chapel in issuing a public statement of the facts and expressing the black citizenry's general terror and hopelessness.¹⁴ Although Imes also visited Oklahoma, he chose not to emigrate there, but remained in Memphis and tried to reason with both whites and blacks. Imes deplored the use of

14. Kansas City *American Citizen*, 1 April 1892; Cleveland *Gazette*, 2 April, 28 May 1892; Washington *Bee*, 2 April 1892; Langston City *Herald*, 5 January 1893; although members of the C.M.E. Church also left Memphis, their clergy opposed the migration, *Christian Index*, 3 September 1892.

15. St. Paul *Appeal*, 26 March 1892.

retalitory violence and hoped for some reconciliation with hostile whites. As he explained:

The murderous spirit and conduct in the South is evoking the sentiment of resentment and revenge on the part of certain ones who speak for the Negro as the victim of these outrages. I regret very much the tendency toward these rash mutterings of violence. What is to be gained by lawlessness? Is there not a higher ground, a stronger method of influencing sentiment in the South?

Let us unite in making an earnest and emphatic protest in language plain but dignified—let the appeal be on the ground of the highest reason, the sense of honor, the love of country. The white man knows that there is a common welfare of the races. Lawlessness is contagious. He ought to have a high sense of justice and beware of imperiling the innocent and cultivating not law but anarchy. The white race make large claims to advanced civilization, religion and general superiority. We ask that they prove these professions.

Violence on our part will give to the blood-thirsty and lawless element of the white race the pretext they desire for showing a fund of unreasoning hate toward the Negro. Let them not have the chance.

We must denounce and in no way shield the crimes of Negroes the same as of other men, and at the same time demand that mob law shall cease to terrorize the suspected innocent. It is easy to charge a crime and identify a man who for some reason has become obnoxious. If half the charges of rape were true it would be a terrible thing. At the same time the law and only the law should pass on these cases.

Violence begets more violence except in rare cases of self-defense. It is not powder nor dynamite we want, but the brave words of truth and justice, the argument which

may reach the highest and not the lowest elements in those whom we would dissuade from evil deeds.¹⁶

It was only after a second lynching crisis occurred on May 21, however, that Imes was given an audience with white Memphians. In a scathing *Free Speech* editorial on the eight southern lynchings of the previous week, Ida B. Wells had stunned the white readership with her comment that "nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction, or a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."¹⁷ At once the Memphis *Scimitar*, assuming that the article was associate editor Fleming's threatened that "unless the Negroes promptly applied the remedy it would be the duty of the whites to tie the author to a stake, brand him on the forehead and perform a surgical operation on him with a pair of shears."¹⁸ Anxious to head off yet another lynching, the white city leaders called an urgent meeting at the Merchants Exchange and agreed to send a delegation to warn the *Free Speech* that unless they refrained from printing such ideas they would "suffer the consequences." Not surprisingly, however, editors Fleming and Wells were no longer around to receive the committee, having already left the Bluff City for the relative safety of the North.

At this point Reverend Imes proposed an interracial meeting to discuss the racial conflict and means of restoring harmony, and on June 7 he was able to bring together at the Cotton Exchange more than sixty black and white members of the local power elite. Speaking for the black community, Imes criticized the white

16. Langston City *Herald*, 28 May 1892.

17. Nashville *Daily American*, 26 May 1892; Kansas City *American Citizen*, 1 July 1892.

18. Reprinted in the Nashville *Daily American*, 16 May 1892.

tendency to blame his entire community for the offenses of a few. Most Negroes, he said, who were themselves appalled by the rashness of the *Free Speech* editorial, should not be held responsible for the incident. Black people were ready to acknowledge that such things as rape did occur among the most vicious element of the race; "but of the large number of Negro coachmen, carriage drivers, house servants, porters, men of all work who are constantly in the service of white ladies and their families, not one, so far as I know," Imes said, "has been guilty of the crime." Most blacks were law-abiding, paid their taxes, had a common interest in good government, and looked for law and order. And whatever mischief may have been wrought by rash and impulsive black leaders, it was far more reprehensible that white papers would uphold the practice of lynching. "We cannot believe," he said, "that any intelligent businessman, merchant, lawyer—any good citizen can honestly advocate lynching as a substitute for the legal process of dealing with crime."¹⁹

White spokesmen approved Reverend Imes' condemnation of mob law, acknowledged the right of black people to equal administration of the law, and pushed through a unanimous repudiation of lynching. A biracial committee, including Imes, drafted resolutions appealing to the paternalistic consciences of white Memphians:

Those composing the dominant and ruling element in every community, large or small, are justly held responsible, in the judgment of intelligent mankind, for the proper government and good conduct of that community, and if they fail in meeting the responsibility thus imposed upon them they fail in the performance of a high public duty.

The white people of the South compose the dominant element, and have control therefore of State and municipal legislation, while they have the making also of the so-

19. *Appeal-Avalanche*, 8 June 1892.

cial laws and customs, together with the public sentiment and thought that prevail in the Southern States.

Under these conditions justice and humanity commands them to give adequate protection from outrage and wrong to the weaker and more helpless element, composed of the colored people, whose former services and devotion to them through a trying ordeal, appeal so strongly for sympathy and kindness.²⁰

Needless to say, Imes' willingness to accept white supremacist positions for the sake of expediency was an anathema for black militants and especially Miss Ida B. Wells who, after fleeing Memphis, had continued her crusade against lynching in the South. Writing from the safety of New York, she sought not to work with white Memphians but to hold up their sins for all the world to see. "White men lynch the offending Afro-American," she wrote, "not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women."²¹ She supported her claim by presenting recent items from the press about white women in Memphis who had seduced or voluntarily submitted to black men. Further to silence the southern fiction that lynch law was only used to check the black man's "bestial propensities," she cited statistics from the *Chicago Tribune* which showed that for a nine month period only one-third of the men who were lynched had ever been charged with rape.

As one who preferred to lower voices and soften hostilities, Reverend Imes felt compelled to join a dozen community leaders in censuring Miss Wells for slandering southern white women.²² But Imes had by now grown weary from his efforts as racial

20. *Ibid.*, 12 June 1892; the "trying ordeal" of yellow fever in 1878-1879 had killed eight thousand Memphians.

21. Ida B. Wells, *United States Atrocities* (London, 1893), 3; See also Alfreda M. Duster (ed.) *Crusader for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

22. *Appeal-Avalanche*, 30 June 1892.

reconciler, a painful and a thankless task within the black community. Before the year was up Imes had left the city for a church in Knoxville, to become yet another in the growing number of black ministers moving out of Memphis, and thus, the city was left without even the most mildly militant of black clergymen.

The pastors who remained were resigned to the futility of seeking happiness in this world, and tended to accept white violence as part of the divine plan for the Negro. Reverend S. N. Vass, for example, the first black principal of Howe Institute, explained that just as slavery had been God's way of raising Africans up from barbarism and ignorance, so had lynchings and disfranchisement been necessary to put blacks back on the road to education. "After the war," Reverend Vass said, "we took to politics instead of our books, and God is using the white man to bring us back to where we ought to have started, by excluding us from politics until first we receive some reasonable degree of education."²³

A more sophisticated analysis, but an equally accommodating one, was advanced by Reverend George Virgil Clark, who replaced Imes at Second Congregational Church. Clark had emerged from Georgia slavery to study for the ministry at Atlanta and Howard Universities. He came to Memphis in 1893 convinced that non-violent blacks were to be God's chosen people. Although it still seemed as if the Anglo-Saxons had replaced Greeks, Romans, or Hebrews as the elect, Reverend Clark believed the Anglo-Saxon to have reached the height of glory and to have begun his decline. Having broken the Golden Rule by making war on all other races, the proud and arrogant Anglo-Saxons were certain to receive God's punishment, while the Lord, in His search for an ideal people, had now turned to the Afro-American. As Reverend Clark explained:

There are some distinguishing characteristics of this, my race, which if called of God, into the service of mankind,

23. Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, 5 December 1899.

will put a distinctive stamp upon history never before made prominent. These characteristics are: docility, patience under adversity, as shown under American slavery, musical, imitative, imaginative, great endurance in toil, forgiving, lovers of domestic life, religious. The race, moreover, is unequalled in natural oratory. Such a race must have a future.

It is barely possible that the Divine purpose in permitting American slavery was to raise up on this continent a future people, who, catching all that was good of Anglo-Saxon civilization, and by the use of his imitative genius, assimilate it with his own native qualities, and so produce the ideal race which God is seeking.

I realize that the American colored man is without a past, such as is the boast of Anglo-Saxons. There was a time when no race was any better off than we are. They had to begin. So must we make a beginning. All contemporary races have a bloody record to confront them. The colored race is to make its conquests with a sheathed sword. This is an age wherein the peace man, as did the Lord Jesus Christ, is to contend against sin and error with righteousness and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. The crown is not to the most intellectual or warlike domineering race, but to the one serving God and man best.

Greece gave the world culture; Rome, law and order; the Hebrews, revelation and the Savior; the Anglo-Saxon, science, social order and the most advanced civilization. It is left to some race to yet give that best obedience which God requires, namely: give supremacy to God in head and heart and to place our neighbors deep down in the citadel of our heart or affections. I would therefore appeal to the colored American to let the zeal of God and an impartial love for our fellowmen, of all races and conditions, friends and foes, be the all-absorbing passion of daily life. If you really love your race, if you would have it without a peer or

parallel in the galaxy of the greatest of nations, then let this love for both Divine and human burn on the altar of your heart. With such God is most well pleased.²⁴

The age of the accommodating minister had thus begun in this decade of the nineties. It was during these years that Memphis lost those pastors, like B. A. Imes, who saw God leading America into an integrated society. The divine plan, as now interpreted by the city's leading black clergymen, called not for an active attempt to integrate blacks into the white community, but required only that blacks cultivate their own Christian way of life and wait for God to make them, the chosen people, the dominant community.

24. James T. Haley, *Afro-American Encyclopedia* (Nashville: James T. Haley, 1895), 372-378, 500-509, 615-616.

5

Reverend Thomas O. Fuller And Racial Adjustment

The most prominent local black pastor during the age of accommodation, Baptist Reverend T. O. Fuller, elevated racial adjustment to a major ministerial art, and in so doing he became the first of his community to hold the attention of the whites for longer than a brief moment of crisis. He told the story of how his people had walked into freedom filled with the spirit of Christ, how they harbored neither bitterness nor hatred towards those who once held them as their property, and how even after all these years of Christian humility they were receiving worse rather than better treatment by the whites. The Reverend Fuller made his point so well and projected it so carefully that no literate Memphian could have missed it.

Fuller's sensitivity to white opinion grew directly out of a racial crisis he had experienced just before moving to Memphis. In 1898 Reverend Fuller had been elected to the State Senate of North Carolina, but the campaign had been the most viciously

anti-Negro ever waged by the Democratic party of his home state. Indeed, the racist campaign for white supremacy so stirred the emotions of North Carolinians that two days after the November election a white mob seized the streets of Wilmington, burned the office of a local Negro newspaper, and shot down a dozen innocent blacks, terrorizing the black population throughout North Carolina.¹

Taking office in the wake of this extreme racial tension, and as the only black elected to the North Carolina Senate, Fuller was naturally under enormous pressure to speak not only for the Negroes in his district of Warren County but also for the blacks everywhere in the state; and the pressure increased once it became clear that he would use his forum to offer not protest leadership but to recommend Christian nonresistance. "Let *UNNECESSARY AGITATION CEASE*," he said to his black constituency. "Go to work, be at peace, and hold the friendship of your neighbors and your future in politics will take care of itself." Senator Fuller refused to press demands for equal justice. "I shall go to the Senate, not as a politician, but as a Christian citizen," he told them. "I shall *DEMAND* nothing, but shall gently and earnestly *PLEAD* for a continuance of the sympathetic and friendly relations which have been the proud boast of us all and which have given North Carolina an exalted place in the great sisterhood of states."² When the Senate convened in 1899 Senator Fuller did plead against the proposed constitutional amendment to disfranchise blacks, but his failure to influence anyone merely intensified the criticism brought against him. It must have been with a sense of relief that he then retreated west, leaving his brief political

1. Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 158-179; Thomas O. Fuller, *Twenty Years in Public Life* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1910), 44.

2. Fuller, *Twenty Years in Public Life*, 44-45.

career—the state's last black senator to serve in his life time—to accept a call from a Baptist church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Not even the disappointments of his tenure in politics made Fuller bitter or resentful towards whites, and this can be understood in light of the interracial friendships Fuller had enjoyed during the formative years he spent in North Carolina. At Shaw University during the eighteen-eighties he had studied theology under a kindly old white preacher and former slave owner, Dr. Thomas E. Skinner, who taught him orthodox fundamentalism, examined him on Baptist doctrine, and finally ordained him as a Baptist minister in 1890. When Fuller began his first church the next year, a white man donated the building site, leaving the young pastor with a profound sense of the benefits which accrued from interracial cooperation. Hence, rather than shaking Fuller's faith in whites, the racist campaign and the Wilmington violence reinforced his desire for maintaining racial harmony. Moreover, Fuller attributed those unfortunate racial incidents to the fact, as he explained it, that southern whites had suffered a severe psychic shock right after the Civil War. For at the very time whites were grieved by the loss of property, friends, and relatives, they were forced to watch "ignorant" Negroes rise to public office. This combination of circumstances so tormented the whites that they lapsed into a kind of insanity whenever they saw black men in political office. To extinguish the fury of the white assault upon his race and restore peace and harmony, Fuller would accept the elimination of black political officials altogether.³

In the same way, Fuller refused to protest the increase of Jim Crow laws. When Jim Crow street cars first came to Memphis in 1905, Senator Fuller, as he was still called, publicly urged compliance:

Conditions call for forbearance and patience and an exercise of discretion on the part of every citizen who

3. *Ibid.*, 18-30, 207-208.

hopes for the best. As to the motive or sentiment which prompted the enactment of the law, I shall not now undertake to define or discuss. Those who wish to resent such sentiment should not do so by becoming passengers and with a spirit of arrogance or stubbornness forment trouble and endanger the lives of peaceable citizens. Those who feel compelled to ride to and from their daily occupations should report all unjust discriminations to the managers of the company whose duty it is to see that their employees keep within the limits of the law. A large number, no doubt, who, wishing to avoid trouble, will either walk or seek other means of conveyance. The law in question, after the fifth of July, will be a regular statute of the state, in full force and effect, and law-abiding citizens can do nothing else but respect its provisions. It is no longer a subject of debate, especially with the conductor, whose position, under the circumstances, is both trying and hazardous. I have written this because I believe it to be my duty as a citizen of Memphis, having religious, educational and property interests that demand the most peaceable conditions and the most perfect harmony and cooperation between the races that can be secured.⁴

For all this, however, Reverend Fuller would never accept the white rationale of racial inferiority. He insisted that "neither in the turn of his foot nor the texture of his hair, neither in the size of his nose or the color of his skin," could evidences of the Negro's inferiority be found.⁵ The Bible, the only standard he considered worthy of credence and serious attention, gave no support for the notion that his people were racially inferior; and he confidently took pride in being a pure black member of what he considered the more Christian, the more forgiving race. "I rejoice tonight

4. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 3 July 1905.

5. Fuller, *Twenty Years in Public Life*, 221.

that I am a Negro," Reverend Fuller told the Memphis Emancipation Celebration of 1 January 1906. "I hope and pray that the anti-kink and anti-Black which wily schemers of the country are now dumping on the market, will fail to destroy the identity of the race and make us ashamed that we are Negroes."⁶

Reverend Fuller was not alone in working to build black pride in Memphis. Baptist Reverend A. L. Hall, a former physician and newspaper editor, published a book, *The Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Greatness of the Negro* (Memphis, 1907). Here the author proposed that during the age of antiquity, blacks, with their Hannibals and Pharoahs, had surpassed the achievements of Anglo-Saxons, and that then the black race had forgotten God and dozed off, "and slept for many centuries." Now that the race had embraced Christianity they would return to their original greatness. "The modern Negro," Hall wrote, "will attempt to lay hold of great things, in spite of all the class legislation and Jim Crowism that can be brought to bear."⁷

Reverend Fuller agreed with Hall that the race should have faith that God would give them strength to help themselves towards greatness. "It is not the shots from the Bleases, the Vardamans, and Tillmans that will bring us to the ground, when we would soar away to heights of honor and fame," Fuller said, "but it will be the poisonous bite of crime, of jealousy, of slander, and of immorality, which, nestled to our bosom, will accomplish our ruin."⁸ He pointed out also that if the 75,000 Memphis Negroes once understood their potential power, they could eliminate many specific racial grievances. "Fifty cents apiece would equip a splendid transportation company to convey our lovely wives and children from place to place and remove them

6. *Ibid.*, 260.

7. A. L. Hall, *The Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Greatness of the Negro* (Memphis: Striker Printers, 1907), 37; G. P. Hamilton, *The Bright side of Memphis* (Memphis: G. P. Hamilton, 1908), 152.

8. T. O. Fuller, *Pictorial History of the American Negro* (Memphis: Pictorial History, 1933), 360.

from the jeers, taunts and insults of street car conductors," Fuller said. "One dollar each would build and equip a splendid university where our aspiring youths could chase the beauties of science over the fields of intellectual discoveries. May it be that a Moses has already seen the golden sunlight of promise, been snatched from the bullrushes by the hand of providence and trained in all the wisdom of the modern Egyptians, who shall lead our people beneath the pillar of cloud and fire, across the seas, and into the land where liberty is something else than a dead letter upon the statute books of a so-called Christian civilization."⁹

It may well be that Fuller saw himself as that Moses of Memphis. For though he had not initiated a separate streetcar line for his people, he did try to build them a great university. During his first year in Memphis he had begun a special class for fifty preachers at Howe Institute, instructing them in theology, church history, and homiletics, and keeping attendance high by distributing weekly sermon outlines. When the Institute's principal resigned in 1902, T. O. Fuller's friends recommended him for the Howe position, and he promised that once in charge of the school he would "make it hum." At the time Reverend Fuller assumed his new duties, the institute provided an essentially religious training on the elementary and secondary school levels, with the high school also offering four years of Latin and a basic academic course. Few local whites, however, were even aware of Howe's academic program since the prudent Reverend Fuller publicized only the school's industrial training, even though in fact, Howe's technical curriculum was limited to cooking for girls and printing for boys. When the *Commercial Appeal* paid for a special summer course at Howe to acquaint 500 city cooks with the latest in gas ranges, canning, baking, meat purchasing, and general house keeping, Fuller saw to it that it got wide coverage in

9. Fuller, *Twenty Years in Public Life*, 261.

the white press, and nothing ever had to be said about the courses in Greek and psychology.¹⁰

Reverend Fuller expanded the campus, enlarged the student body to almost 300, and continued to be a spokesman for better communication between the races. He spent much of his time meeting with white politicians, businessmen, and editors, and was able, as he explained, to get a forum for his views by submitting to the white press more columns of print than had any other black man in Memphis history:

I meet . . . white editors especially, and I write editorials for papers. By coming in contact with them I am enabled in this way to reach the white people of the community. I can get into the papers whatever I wish, only sometimes I say something they don't care to publish, and they cut that out, but they don't refuse me. I have been able to reach the white people in this way. The white publications have been a silent force helping us. As the readers read in the daily papers, they have talked among themselves, and the boys and girls hear it, and so the knowledge is spread.¹¹

Fuller's efforts to establish racial understanding were handicapped tremendously by the hostile climate which was, according to the testimony of an English tourist, still as intense and prejudiced as ever. The Englishman had visited a local book store on Main Street and asked for a copy of W. E. B. DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk*. Instead of the book, the proprietor delivered a

10. *Commercial Appeal*, 30 March 1901; T. O. Fuller, "Ups and Downs of a Negro School Boy in the South," *Opportunity* I (June 1923), 215-216; *Cleveland Gazette*, 5 July 1913; U. S. Bureau of Education, *Negro Education Bulletin* 1916, No. 39 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917), 559.

11. William Newton Hartshorn (ed.) *An Era of Progress and Promise 1863-1910; The Religious, Moral, and Educational Development of the American Negro Since His Emancipation* (Boston: Priscilla Publishing Company, 1910), 117.

racist lecture. "I tell you, sir," the owner said, "no pen can describe the horrors of the Reconstruction Period, when all that was best in the white South was outlawed, and the nigger rode roughshod over us. The true story of that time will never be written in history. It is known only to those who went through it."¹² The shopkeeper declared that the Ku Klux Klan had saved American civilization from blacks, and then sold the Englishman not the book he had requested by the black historian, but *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon Jr., a popular white racist attack on the Negroes.

Fuller tried to fight this bigotry by delivering a message of peace and good will, and by telling the story of Reconstruction differently from *The Clansman*. Rather than being a major threat to white civilization, blacks' passage from slavery to freedom had never disturbed the old friendships and affections between master and slave. The cordial spirit between the races had enabled Negroes to settle down and make their homes on the very farms where they had previously served. Indeed, as Fuller told it, except for a few isolated instances, he could recall no hostile feelings between the races during his childhood. Granted, separate schools and churches did exist, but whites often visited black churches and blacks often visited white. The races rode together on the trains and lived in the same neighborhoods, with serious racial friction emerging only at the turn of the century, when separate communities developed in the urban South.¹³

Although racial separatism seemed to have fostered racial antagonism, Fuller did not see integration as the key to restoring racial harmony. To the contrary, Fuller advocated separatism governed by the Golden Rule as the way to solve the present racial troubles:

12. William Archer, *Through Afro-America* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1910), 60.

13. *Commercial Appeal*, 31 December 1922; T. O. Fuller, *Bridging the Racial Chasms* (Memphis: T. O. Fuller, 1937), 33.

Let the races find a way to advance along separate and distinct parallel lines, each race reaching its highest possibilities and cooperating in matters that are mutually helpful without molesting that which is the conceded right and prerogative of the other—the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness along chosen, righteous lines. Living together as we are in the South, the tree of mutual good must not be left to itself, it must be carefully and gently cultivated. The weeds, briars and poisonous vines of distrust, prejudice and hatred should not be allowed to rob the soil of those elements so essential to its life and growth.¹⁴

To help whites eliminate the “weeds” and “briars,” Reverend Fuller organized blacks into an Inter-Racial League, asking for better schools and recreational facilities, for less brutal treatment by street car conductors and policemen. He wrote letters to the *Commercial Appeal*, asking editor C. P. J. Mooney to “consider the advisability of eliminating the following terms when writing about Negroes: ‘Darky, nigger, coon, negress, the black.’”¹⁵ At the same time, Fuller attended to the “weeds” in his own neighborhood. When Memphis received the dubious distinction of becoming the murder capital of the world—there were sixty-seven murders for every 100,000 persons as compared to seven for every 100,000 in New York City—Reverend Fuller and his Inter-Racial League initiated a black campaign for “upholding the law, discouraging idleness, letting whisky alone, staying away from bad company and halting the custom of carrying dangerous weapons.” Anti-crime orators spoke in the churches, schools, theatres, and on the street corners. There was even a Negro

14. *Commercial Appeal*, 31 December 1922.

15. T. O. Fuller to *Commercial Appeal*, 31 October 1925, 31 October 1925, reprinted in *Interracial Blue Book 1925-26* (Memphis: Interracial League, 1926).

parade with a placard depicting lethal weapons and bearing the slogans: "Don't shoot! Don't kill. Crime hurts our race. Crime hurts Memphis. Our murder record must be reduced. Fifty-seven men and women died at our own hands last year. Crime must be checked."¹⁶

The Inter-Racial League included clergymen and the Booker T. Washington wing of the business and professional community. These civic leaders sought to avoid partisan issues but still faced opposition from the smaller group of militant businessmen who were active in the NAACP and Republican politics. The militants, who regarded the League as an organization of Uncle Toms, maintained a constant drumfire of opposition, criticizing especially the League's anti-crime campaign and its successful lobby to have city hall change the name of "Negro Industrial High School" to "Booker T. Washington High School."¹⁷ Criticism from these NAACP advocates, to be sure, increased Fuller's support from the white community. "Dr. Fuller," the *Commercial Appeal* said, "speaks without prejudice and without passion and what he suggests to the white people on matters of current importance should be heeded and the members of his own race will make no mistake if they follow his advice."¹⁸ Political boss E. H. Crump also held the Reverend in high esteem and later recalled that Fuller "thoroughly understood his own race as well as the white people, and his work was always helpful and constructive. With never any flurry or boast, he steadfastly pursued his duties to God and man as he saw them, using deep piety and common sense in every human contact."¹⁹

Despite his rapport with the white power elite and all his success in securing better education, health, and recreation for

16. *Commercial Appeal*, 29 January 1924, 1, 6 February 1925.

17. Interview with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, 16 March 1972; the Republican politicians have been studied by David M. Tucker, *Lt. Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971).

18. *Commercial appeal*, 19 May 1923.

19. *Ibid.*, 22 June 1942.

his community, white racism blocked Fuller's attempt to make Howe an institute of higher education. After the Tennessee Negro Baptist college, Roger Williams, burned in Nashville during 1927, Fuller arranged for a merger of Howe and Roger Williams in Memphis, and even made a down payment on a \$35,000 building site on South Parkway for the new institute. Although blacks already lived near the proposed campus, white civic clubs banded together in opposition to the plans, since a college would surely bring in Negroes from the North. The clubs pressured the city commission to withhold its permission for building on the site, and Memphis politicians capitulated, thus preventing Howe-Roger Williams from ever becoming a reality. It was a stunning blow for Fuller, and even the white *Commercial Appeal* was critical of the city's bigotry and shortsightedness in the matter. "There is no other place in the country," it said, "where an institution for the education of Negroes, backed by whites and Negroes carrying an endowment of a half-million dollars, would be kicked and cuffed around as has been done in this instance."²⁰

If this would have turned most men bitter, it only made Fuller more determined to further black Christian pride. Taking several years leave from the presidency of Howe in 1931, he took up the pen and began his most ambitious literary effort, *Pictorial History of the American Negro* (Memphis, 1933), a history intended to inspire the youth and encourage them to build on the material and spiritual foundations of their fathers. Fuller's black history boasted of black economic, educational, political, and spiritual progress; and its more than four hundred photographs—first an African witch doctor and slave markets, finally pictures of modern churches, ministers, insurance men, college professors, and the new black Representative Oscar De Priest—were presented as visible proof of this remarkable racial development.

A serious defect of black education had always been those standard American history text books which ignored the

20. Ibid., 18, 27 March 1928.

achievements of the Negro. White authors, according to Fuller, knew little or nothing of the separate black community and only a Negro historian could reveal the achievements of his people to the world and especially to black students. "Negro history is necessary for the proper education and inspiration of the youth of the race," Fuller wrote. "Examples of thrift, of patriotic loyalty to the country, and of success along various lines, have a stronger appeal when they rise out of the group which individual readers are members."²¹ Now black children would have not only the story of Afro-Americans but the pictorial proof as well.

The *Pictorial History* might have shocked some white school boards. Fuller reprinted the "Confessions of Nat Turner," criticized slavery, and praised the Negro's role in Reconstruction. But, characteristically, he also endeavored to make the book acceptable to whites by having an elderly acquaintance, Confederate General C. A. De Saussure, write a friendly introduction to the work. Fuller shrewdly secured the introduction without permitting his friend to read the manuscript, but such prudence was surely unnecessary because very few passages would have offended the General. For Fuller was extremely cautious, and used his words most judiciously. When he mentioned the topic of civil rights, he wrote:

On the law books of the land there are many statutes that fetter the Negro and retard his progress. Many of these statutes were enacted when the promoters, perhaps, did not understand the Negro as well as they do now. Since their enactment the Negro has demonstrated his loyalty both in war and peace. He has never deserted his country in a crisis. His neighbors could not have a truer nor more faithful friend. Why not see what can be done to keep the Negro happy and contented in a land that is dear to him?²²

21. Fuller, *Pictorial History of the American Negro*, 305.

22. *Ibid.*, 329.

The reader will be interested as he notes the fact that as the Negro has advanced in education, in business, in religion, and in social and industrial lines, the limitations and restrictions on his freedom and privileges have been increased and intensified.²³

The *Pictorial History* concluded with an optimism characteristic of Reverend Fuller. "There are times of darkness and, perhaps, discouragement for some," he said, "yet as night follows day, and as the calm follows the storm, so surely will our days of darkness and disappointment give place to days of success and triumph." Blacks should therefore face the future with high aspirations but without bitterness towards those who had blocked racial progress, with pride in black achievements but with gratitude for those whites who had lent a helping hand. Above all, the Negro American should let the "All Wise Providence light the way for him as he travels."²⁵

During the hard times of the Depression, Reverend Fuller's optimism may have been shaken by the reversals he suffered. He lost access to the columns of the daily newspaper when the National Scripps-Howard chain purchased the *Commercial Appeal* and permitted its new northern-born editor to end the old understanding with Fuller. The Depression also led to the rapid deterioration of Negro programs of Christian education—Howe was mortgaged so heavily that it soon represented a value of no more than \$6,000—and Reverend Fuller lamented:

Our children are being turned away from the true faith by false teachers who would ridicule the Christian religion and substitute the teachings of science. We must rally to the support of our Christian schools or our churches will

23. *Ibid.*, 307.

24. *Ibid.*, 322.

25. *Ibid.*, 330, 308.

lose the support of our young people. The cry, "standard, accredited schools," has brought our Christian schools into disfavor. Our teachers are just as prepared and the class room work is just as effective, but the accrediting agencies give preference to the public schools, which are their own, for the most part. And, too, the teachers in schools who know practically nothing about the Bible are attempting to spread their misinterpretations among their students, and thereby create doubt as to the value and power of Christianity.²⁶

To preserve the faith and the morale of his people, Fuller continued to write black history. His next work, *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee* (Memphis, 1936), encouraged his people to take heart in their history, especially in the first years after the war, the "good old days" when the people were more "church minded" and Reverend Morris Henderson had packed the people in at Beale Street Baptist Church. Page after page of stories and anecdotes, related by old timers, brought earlier glories of the church back to life. Since Fuller depended entirely on oral tradition, having little or no written church records, his story included those minor inaccuracies which generally gloss over the bad and exaggerate the good, but whatever was lost in historical accuracy, was made up for by a grateful readership.

In his advocacy of black history Reverend Fuller may seem almost a modern—he even established a Negro history museum—but concern with the past had been typical of black leaders during the age of accommodation. While mob violence of the late nineteenth century had turned leaders from protest, these deteriorating conditions had never killed hopes for racial equality. Writing black history offered a way to instill pride and to prove blacks worthy of civil rights, so Booker T. Washington and

26. T. O. Fuller, *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee* (Memphis: Haskins Printers, 1936), 268.

other accommodators had written race history. Reverend Fuller followed the pattern of Booker T. Washington when he wrote to arouse pride in his race and sympathy from the whites.

In his theology, as in his history, Fuller remained a product of the lynch law era. White violence and white theology led most ministers of that generation to believe the fundamental principle of the Bible to be peace and good will towards all mankind, and not black liberation. Ministers who accepted the Bible as the inspired word of God—teaching love, forgiveness, self-denial, and the brotherhood of man—could certainly never advocate the liberation of black people by any means necessary. But neither must a minister ignore the oppression of his people, and Fuller often reminded whites of the golden rule and how they could better follow it by helping the black community. In laboring to free his people, Fuller even came to defend members of the NAACP as “good citizens,” but he never became a militant, holding instead to the old style of personal diplomacy, working closely with Boss Crump as race mediator, and remaining the most respected black spokesman for racial reconciliation.²⁷

27. T. O. Fuller to E. H. Crump, 23 April 1942, Mayors' Correspondence, Negroes 1942 File (City Archives, Memphis); *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 June 1942; *Commercial Appeal*, 22 June 1942; interview with Reverend A. McEwen Williams, 30 June 1971.

6

Reverend Sutton E. Griggs and Black Social Efficiency

At first, Sutton E. Griggs was the black man's answer to the Southern Baptists' racist, Thomas Dixon Jr. To the warm applause of the National Baptist Convention, Reverend Griggs penned protest tracts and novels with a militancy many thought radical, defending the manhood rights of his people against the assaults of Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman* (1905), and participating actively in the militant Niagara Movement. Later Reverend Griggs reversed his tactics dramatically to accommodation when the race refused to follow his protest leadership, but although he ceased to assault southern racists verbally, he never abandoned his intellectual efforts to elevate the race.¹

1. The extreme shift in racial stance, the meagerness of biographical information, and the relative inaccessibility of his locally published novels and tracts, have confused scholars and led to distortions of this black intellectual. Professor Hugh M. Gloster, who drew scholarly interest to Griggs, overstated the

An intellectual among Negro Baptist clergymen may have seemed unusual, but Griggs had grown up with all the advantages open to the son of a Dallas minister. He was born in 1872, the son of a former Georgia slave who became one of the most respected black pastors in Texas. President of the National Baptist Convention, and editor of the *National Baptist Bulletin*, the elder Griggs had entered the ministry with very little education; but he regularly attended ministerial institutes and devoted a year to study in the Richmond Theological Seminary, emerging as a scholarly minister prepared to move beyond the simple folk preaching of his shouting and groaning brothers.² His son began a ministerial education in the local Bishop College, of which his father was a trustee, and then went on to the Richmond Theological Seminary. After graduation, young Griggs took a pastorate in Virginia and continued to study and read, acquiring

case by calling the man "the novelist of the New Negro." Robert A. Bone presented a far more accurate reading of the novelist, focusing on both the militant and the accommodationist; yet because his sources were also limited to novels, Bone had difficulty explaining the complexity of the man. In a recent attempt to provide such an analysis, S. P. Fullinwider suggested that Griggs was simply a "marginal man," a confused mulatto. However, with all the evidence in, it is clear that the tan-skinned Griggs had no such identity problem, but must be seen rather as an intellectual who believed he held the key to racial progress and needed only to gain the support of his people. A photograph which appears in T. O. Fuller's *Pictorial History of the American Negro* (Memphis: Pictorial History, 1933), 250, makes clear that Griggs could never have passed for a white man. Nor did he make light-skinned heroes for his novels. He spoke through dark men, like Belton Piedmont of *Imperium In Imperio* (Cincinnati: Editor Publishing Company, 1899). See Hugh M. Gloster, "Sutton Griggs, Novelist of the New Negro," *Phylon* IV (Winter 1943), 335-345; Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 32-35; S. P. Fullinwider, *The Mind and Mood of Black America* (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1969), 73-77.

2. J. J. Pipkin, *The Story of a Rising Race* (n.p.: N. D. Thompson Publishing Company, 1902), 113; T. O. Fuller, *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee* (Memphis: Haskins Printers, 1936), 76; *Home Missionary Monthly* XV (October 1893), 343.

a personal library which would grow to more than two thousand volumes.³

Alarmed by what had been happening to his race in the 1890s—the increase in lynchings, black disfranchisement, and the growth of segregation—the Berkley, Virginia, pastor decided to expose the white racial atrocities and present alternative solutions within the literary framework of a novel. In *Imperium In Imperio* (Cincinnati, 1899), “the cringing, fawning, sniffling, cowardly Negro which slavery left, had disappeared,” and Griggs introduced his readers to the “new Negro, self-respecting, fearless, and determined in the assertion of his rights.”⁴ The militant blacks of Griggs’ novel organized their own black power Imperium and debated the merits of emigration, amalgamation, protest, and racial war. Griggs’ own fictional spokesman, Belton Piedmont, advocated non-violent protest. “Let us pull the veil from before the eyes of the Anglo-Saxon,” he said, “that he may see the New Negro standing before him humbly, but firmly demanding every right granted him by his maker and wrested from him by man.” Belton continued:

Other races which have obtained their freedom erect monuments over bloody spots where they slew their fellow men. May God favor us to obtain our freedom without having to dot our land with these relics of barbaric ages.

The Negro is the latest comer upon the scene of modern civilization. It would be the crowning glory of even this marvelous age; it would be the grandest contribution ever made to the cause of human civilization; it would be a worthy theme for the songs of the Holy Angels, if every Negro, away from the land of his nativity, can by means of the pen, force an acknowledgement of equality from the proud lips of the fierce, all conquering Anglo-Saxon, thus

3. Pittsburgh Courier, 21 January 1933.

4. Griggs, *Imperium In Imperio*, 33.

eclipsing the record of all other races of men, who without exception have had to wade through blood to achieve their freedom.⁵

Despite this eloquent plea, the Imperium moved to seize the state of Texas and establish a black nation there; and the non-violent Piedmont was executed by the brothers for refusing to cooperate. But racial war was certainly not the policy which the author wanted to endorse and he concluded his story by having the Secretary of State in the Imperium to betray the plans for racial war and thus prevent the devastation which would have been terrible for both races.

Griggs fully anticipated that Negroes would eagerly purchase the *Imperium In Imperio* and support the ideas of its author. But when he sent out review copies to twenty prominent blacks, only four bothered to reply. Neither did the masses submit mail orders for the book, and thus the novel was a financial failure with Griggs able to sell only a few copies by direct soliciting. The Reverend hesitated to blame his race for the financial loss.⁶ Perhaps, he thought he had failed to clearly explain his plan for the race to rally behind nonviolent spokesmen for equality. Or perhaps his message could better be distributed from the Mid-South. So he moved from Virginia to Nashville, Tennessee, and wrote another protest novel, *Overshadowed* (1901). Again blacks would not buy the book. Determined to try once more, Griggs wrote *Unfettered* (1902) and included a full discussion of his ideas in the last chapter, entitled: "Dorlan's Plan: A Dissertation on the Race Problem."

If blacks were to have their equality, Griggs stressed, they must create a racial organization to harness the strength of the millions of Negroes. Their association must make a study of the

5. *Ibid.*, 246-247.

6. Sutton E. Griggs, *The Story of My Struggles* (Memphis: National Public Welfare League, 1914), 8-10.

retarding forces within the Negro community and then move to correct and strengthen black institutions—the home, the school, and the church. The Negro church, in particular, must be modernized so that its primary concern would be improving the condition of black people in this world rather than in the next. Ever since its formation, back in the days of slavery, when hopeless blacks turned their thoughts to “the death bed, the funeral, the grave, the world to come,” the ethnic church had continued its morbid dwelling on anticipated worlds; and Griggs’ organization would now redirect black religion’s otherworldly emphasis by stressing the new conceptions of Christianity which applied the ethical teachings of Jesus to life in the here and now.⁷

While working to strengthen the race’s institutions, Griggs’ black organization must also propagandize the whites and persuade them to abandon their belief in racial supremacy.

Our racial organization must utilize the talent of the race for oratory and send able men with burning hearts to speak with flaming tongues of such wrongs as the South wittingly or unwittingly imposes upon us. Negro newspapers must be supported, until their unquestioned excellence makes a way for them into homes without regard for race. Daily newspapers and magazines, favorable to the highest interests of the race, must be established so that the outpourings of the souls of Negro writers may have better opportunities of reaching the world. The poem, the novel, the drama must be pressed into service. The painter, the sculptor, the musical composer must plead our cause in the world of aesthetics. The bird that would live must thrill the huntsman with his song. With the sympathies of the world thus enkindled, there are none who would wish to withhold our rights.⁸

7. Sutton E. Griggs, *Unfettered* (Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1902), 244-245.

8. *Ibid.*, 274.

Griggs clearly delivered his program for achieving equality but once again found his efforts ignored by black people. At this point he "lifted the blame" from himself and "sorrowfully laid it at the door" of his race.⁹ Blacks simply refused to support intelligently militant leadership and so, after three financial failures, Reverend Griggs almost abandoned his writing, but the National Baptist Convention voted unanimously to have him answer the racist tirades of Reverend Thomas Dixon Jr.'s new book, *The Leopard's Spots*. Anticipating that he would now have the support of all the thousands of Negro Baptists, Reverend Griggs returned to his writing desk for another novel both exposing white brutality and defending the humanity of black people.

The Hindered Hand (1905) devotes an entire chapter to specifically repudiating Thomas Dixon Jr., and the remainder of the novel to forthrightly condemning white racism and especially lynching. After one horrible Mississippi mob action, Griggs has a character to ask if the lynching had resulted from "the one crime." The answer was:

That's rot about one crime. We lynch niggers down here for anything. We lynch them for being sassy and sometimes lynch them on general principles. The truth of the matter is the real "one crime" that paves the way for a lynching whenever we have the notion, is the crime of being black.¹⁰

The same year that Griggs published *The Hindered Hand*, a black protest organization, the Niagara Movement, emerged in the North. While Griggs did not travel to Niagara to help organize the group, he did become one of the few southern minis-

9. Griggs, *The Story of My Struggles*, 11.

10. Sutton E. Griggs, *The Hindered Hand* (Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1905), 136.

ters to join the Movement.¹¹ Unlike his fellow Baptist pastors, Griggs shared the theological modernism of radical northern clergymen like R. R. Wright and Reverdy C. Ransom who were also active in the Niagara Movement. These two Chicago A.M.E. ministers had organized what was then called an institutional church, a social gospel ministry which struggled against poverty, otherworldly religion, and the caste system. Just as Wright and Ransom attempted to direct the efforts of the church towards this world, so did Griggs seek to use his position for civil rights and social reform.

The city of Nashville has been well known for displaying the best of southern culture, but Griggs found it to be equally marked by its racist attitudes. He discovered that Nashville was determined to eliminate the Negro from politics, that its budget appropriated almost nothing for black education (Griggs' own daughter had been turned away from the overcrowded school) and that the city fathers permitted such vicious police brutality that the lives of blacks were insecure and "fast becoming unbearable."¹² To expose these abominations, Griggs published a little book called *The One Great Question: A Study of Southern Conditions at Close Range* (1907) and argued that racial equality, not repression, was the way to peaceful coexistence. Local leaders and public opinion makers must express their commitment to racial justice, invite advocates of equality such as W. E. B. DuBois to deliver public lectures in the city, and pressure Congress to make the 15th Amendment effective once and for all.

When the race permitted *The One Great Question* to become yet another financial failure, and refused to endorse the Niagara Movement, the disappointment led to a turning point in Griggs' attitude toward protest. Blacks had demonstrated their inability

11. August Meier, *Negro Thought in America 1880-1915* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 180.

12. Sutton E. Griggs, *The One Great Question: A Study of Southern Conditions at Close Range* (Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1907), 31.

to support even the most intelligent leadership among them. If growing white racism were to be stopped, then Griggs must first direct his message to whites. If he could win the acclaim and encouragement of white people then blacks might also follow his leadership. Just as Booker T. Washington had been endorsed first by whites and then followed by black Americans, so must Griggs seek white approval first. Thus the militant Griggs became an accommodating black, a move which many of his friends failed to understand.¹³

Griggs now looked for white encouragement. In his next, and last novel, *Pointing the Way* (1908), the race problem was solved by persuading a white attorney to run for mayor on a platform pledging justice to all citizens. Then in a series of pamphlets, published as *Wisdom's Call* (1911), Griggs told whites how they would harm their own race by dealing unjustly with the Negro. If blacks continued to be so abused, Negro women would start to look for white men to father their children, so their lighter offspring could pass into the advantaged race. The black man's struggle for survival would force race mixing and an army of light Negroes would move up into the Anglo-Saxon race. The struggle for existence was one of those natural laws which whites could not afford to ignore. Only by listening to "Wisdom's Call" and treating Negroes with justice, kindness, and fair play could white southern statesmen insure that black maternal instincts would work to preserve the purity of its own species.¹⁴

Still in search of the financial means to place his ideas in the hands of every white leader, Griggs left Nashville in 1913 for the larger city of Memphis and the pastorate of the Tabernacle Baptist Church which he planned to convert into a conservative institutional church. A more cautious Reverend Griggs now exp-

13. Fuller, *History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee*, 75-78; Griggs said "the outstanding men of the black race hadn't amounted to anything till they had been discovered by white people," Eldon Roark to author, 14 December 1970.

14. Sutton E. Griggs, *Wisdom's Call* (Nashville: Orion Publishing Co., 1911), 247-249.

lained that an institutional church was much like Tuskegee Institute, where Booker T. Washington had helped the black masses adjust to their southern environment. In the same way the Tabernacle Institutional Baptist Church would help the Negroes of Memphis fit snugly into their proper places, equipping them with sound moral principles and the skills they needed to serve whites well. Griggs' institutional church would teach domestic science to make better black cooks for white Memphis homes. His employment bureau would provide the white community with well-trained black labor. His gym and swimming pool would keep young men away from pool rooms and gambling dives, out of jail, and on the labor force. "Religion ought to do more than help a man reach heaven when he dies," Griggs said. "It ought to help him to live in this world. It ought to help people meet every problem of life."¹⁵

Griggs' strategy of representing his institutional church as conservative won him enormous white support in Memphis and gave him a more powerful forum than he had ever been able to get before. He now had the ear of influential white Memphians who endorsed his work in the Chamber of Commerce and arranged for him to speak before the white Memphis elite.¹⁶ While the pages of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* welcomed his speeches, letters, and interviews, white pocketbooks were also opened and thousands of dollars were donated for construction of the new \$85,000 institutional church.¹⁷ Griggs' success with the white power structure probably had less to do with his rhetorical skill than with the economic realities of the World War I era. As local blacks moved north to the higher wages and greater freedom of Chicago and Detroit, the migration created a serious labor shortage, so serious in fact that the Memphis Chamber of Com-

15. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 13 April 1913, 17 April, 26 June, 1 July, 9 July 1916; *The Neighbor*, December 1919.

16. *Commercial Appeal*, 26 March, 6 October 1919.

17. *Memphis Chamber of Commerce Journal IV* (May, 1921), 11.

merce established a committee, the Industrial Welfare Committee, "to keep its Negroes in Memphis." A white banker, S. W. Williamson, announced that colored people were one of Memphis' greatest assets and "anything therefore that will make our colored people more contented and happy, will necessarily be of great advantage to us in the future."¹⁸ A commercial feed company executive, J. T. Morgan, agreed: "The business men of Memphis should make Memphis the best town in this country for our Negro population, make it so much better for them to live in that they will not want to migrate to better places."¹⁹ Memphis industrialists found Griggs invaluable in immunizing blacks against the emigration propaganda. They raised money for black community centers and encouraged their conservative leadership. "If the south gets behind her sane Negro leaders," one Memphis banker said, "she will resist the influence of radical northern Negroes."²⁰ Another banker, chairman of the Industrial Welfare Committee, concurred: "The right leadership of the Negro race should be encouraged in every way."

With white financial support, Griggs could now disseminate his ideas in books, pamphlets, and newspapers. In December 1919 he published 25,000 copies of a little paper—"The Neighbor"—for free distribution among Memphis blacks. Under the Biblical injunction "Thou Shalt Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself," Reverend Griggs preached racial cooperation as a Darwinian necessity. Since all lived in a universe of change, he said, "the insects, animals and races of men that have firmly grasped the fact that conditions change are those that have survived."²¹ Unfortunately, Griggs observed, the black man was the most conservative of races, in both Africa and America. The southern

18. *Commercial Appeal*, 26 March, 6 October, 1919.

19. *Ibid.*, 28 March 1919.

20. *Chamber of Commerce Journal* II (December 1919), 263.

21. *The Neighbor*, December 1919; *Commercial Appeal*, 21 December 1919.

black still looked to the North and the Republican party as his real friends even though the old sectional antagonism ceased to exist after northern race riots had united northern and southern Anglo-Saxons against the African. Only by abandoning the Republican party, Griggs argued, recognizing the end of sectional politics, and ending all denunciation of the white south, and indeed cooperating with the wealthy white elite, could black Americans hope to advance.

In giving his people this advice, Griggs was assuming that white leadership had at last come to recognize its obligation to the black man. When signs of southern racism did appear, he now tried to explain them away. "While horrible lynchings yet take place in the south," he wrote on one occasion, "southern leaders are denouncing the practice in unmeasured terms, a fact that causes the nation to feel that the best white people of the south will one day master it."²² Griggs was even known to have repeated the white defense of lynching. "Now suppose some colored man is lynched," he is reported as having said. "You all know that man must have done something, if he hadn't hey wouldn't lynch him."²³ Naturally local blacks now tended to think of Griggs as an "Uncle Tom" or a "white man's nigger" who permitted himself to be used as a tool for keeping the race in its inferior position, but his critics were rarely able to express their opposition publicly. The white dailies would certainly not print NAACP criticisms of Griggs, the man whom they were openly endorsing. "Sutton Griggs," they wrote, "is a thrifty, intelligent, self-respecting Negro, who possesses the faculty of looking facts squarely in the face; and we think he is an eminently safe leader of his people."²⁴

With the encouragement and support of the white press and

22. *Commercial Appeal*, 3 March 1918.

23. Fred L. Hutchins to author, 19 March 1969.

24. *Commercial Appeal*, 13 March 1921; B. M. Roddy to Walter F. White, 22 March 1921, Box G-199, NAACP Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).

the Memphis Chamber of Commerce, Griggs now believed that relations between the races had ceased to be a serious problem and he could return to his original goal of correcting the retarding forces within the Negro community. His concern with efficient racial traits had come from reading Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* (1894), a best-selling sociological study of the progress of the Anglo-Saxon race.²⁵ Kidd, unlike most other British Darwinists, had found religion to be of great value in the development of the British people. He believed that what led to racial superiority was not intellectual ability, but the tendency of individuals to subordinate themselves for the good of society, a characteristic inculcated by white Christianity. Griggs embraced this analysis and determined to launch a black crusade to point out the Negro's trait deficiencies and the means by which the race could alter its character, attain collective efficiency, and keep pace with the evolution of the Anglo-Saxons.

Griggs now published his ideas in the *Guide to Racial Greatness: or The Science of Collective Efficiency* (Memphis, 1923). The book received rave reviews from the local newspapers, of course. "Students of psychology say he is one of the profoundest thinkers of modern times," the *Commercial Appeal* said of Sutton E. Griggs, "and agree almost unanimously that the movement he is now promoting, if put into practice, will by subconscious thought and action tend to eradicate undesirable traits of character."²⁶

Blacks could move ahead as a group, the *Guide to Racial Greatness* said, if they only adopted some thirty characteristics, including those generally considered to be Christian virtues—self renunciation, love of neighbors, control of appetites, patience, honesty, reliability, courtesy, tact—and also including those more secular virtues—curiosity, courage, persistence, energy, promptness, tendency to plan, self-respect, common sense, and willing-

25. Griggs, *Unfettered*, 244; Sutton E. Griggs, *Light on Racial Issues* (Memphis: National Public Welfare League, 1921), 9-10.

26. *Commercial Appeal*, 30 March 1924.

ness to follow leaders. If the home, the school, and the church participated in this work of building these traits, Griggs promised, black America could be reformed within a single generation. The church in particular could do much because

Religion places before its followers common ideals that unify them and cause them to labor for common ends. It is dedicated to the task of eliminating selfishness which inevitable gives rise to a blighting individualism. By insisting on a change of heart, men are brought to master those impulses that came into our nature in the period when it was the chief occupations of man to wage aggressive warfare and to defend themselves from attacks growing out of greed and hatred. If collective efficiency is to be obtained, there can be no ignoring of religion.

The minister of religion should hold in mind that he has an earthly as well as a heavenly duty; that he is not only required to fashion souls for citizenship in heaven but for citizenship on earth as well. The kingdom is to come on earth even as it is in heaven. Every element that is demanded for collective efficiency has support in the Bible, and he who would aid in fashioning the model social group will find in the Bible a text to serve as a basis for every point involved. There is that in the Bible which, properly expounded, will stimulate the habit of seconding, the spirit of inquiry, the love of unity, the suppression of jealousy; will stimulate each and every moral virtue necessary for collective efficiency, whether mental, moral or tempermental; will create beings able to act together enduringly. Here is room for the Bible student to establish the connection between it and each element necessary for the manifestation of collective efficiency.²⁷

27. Sutton E. Griggs, *Guide to Racial Greatness or the Science of Collective Efficiency* (Memphis: National Public Welfare League, 1923), 209.

To reach the black public schools, which Griggs considered as important as the churches, the Reverend sought endorsements of educators, school board presidents, and state teachers associations. Griggs told black teachers that the white mode of education was wholly inadequate for Negro children. The system had served whites well because reinforcing the white school there was the mother and the home to socialize the child, but the mother of the Negro child had to work and this placed the entire burden of socialization on the school experience. "The supreme need of the Negro race is socialization," Griggs said. "It will be a terrible tragedy to give intellectual training to a small group of unsocialized Negroes and turn them loose upon the helpless millions of the race."²⁸ In Texas, Missouri, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Tennessee, Reverend Griggs lectured on the retarding forces within the race,²⁹ advertised his books, and collected endorsements for his ideas such as the resolution of the Colored State Teachers' Association of Texas:

In his thesis on "Racial Traits," Dr. Sutton E. Griggs has made a distinct contribution to scientific thought, that ranks in importance with the new light thrown on the natural and social sciences by such eminent thinkers as Darwin, Galton, Edison, Wells, James, Ellwood and Carver.

This significant treatise is of special interest to teachers; and in fact, to leaders in every field of service among Negroes, because it lays the basis for scientific approach to the problems involved in building a race of highly efficient men.

Be it resolved, therefore, that the Colored Teachers' State Association of Texas commend Dr. Griggs for his eminent service to the human race in his scientific study.

28. *Commercial Appeal*, 16 January 1927.

29. *Ibid.*, 16 December 1923; 16 August, 15 December 1925; 19 October 1926; 30 January, 18 May 1927; 17 November 1929.

Be it further resolved, that we endorse this unique book, "Guide to Racial Greatness," adopt it as a help for the teachers of Texas in their special preparation for the work of teaching, and in their development of that deep insight into our racial traits that is indispensable, if we would direct our youth to the attainment of their highest and best.³⁰

But despite all this, and his efforts to refine and sharpen his message in *Stepping Stones to Higher Things* (1925), *The Winning Policy* (1927), and *Cooperative Natures and Social Education* (1929), there is no real indication that teachers actually accepted his program of trait building. Certainly the black Memphis school principals never purchased Griggs' work for textbooks, as he requested, and the more militant Memphians complained that he actually damaged racial pride by teaching children to "bow low and look up to the southern white man as something of a Jesus," always stressing the worst characteristics of Negroes. The local black pride advocates—the NAACP leaders, the insurance men, and the Republican politicians—denounced his rejection of protest and promotion of accommodation.³¹

While Griggs candidly admitted that his ministry received more support and encouragement from whites than from blacks, he still expected to be fully approved by the people of his own race. He reasoned that since Afro-Americans lacked "the seconding spirit," the habit of following worthwhile leaders, he would have to wait for white encouragement and support to draw black endorsement.³² Yet what had worked for Booker T. Washington in the nineteenth century failed to work for Griggs. Even in a southern city like Memphis, Griggs grew increasingly unpopular

30. *Ibid.*, 16 December 1923.

31. David M. Tucker, "Black Pride and Negro Business in the 1920's," *Business History Review* XLIII (Winter 1969), 446-448.

32. Eldon Roark to author, 14 December 1970.

with his race until the great crash of 1929 brought down his last hopes. Having devoted his efforts to writing and lecturing throughout the South, rather than building a tithing congregation and paying off the church mortgage, Reverend Griggs was caught by an economic squeeze when he was unable to make the 1 May 1930 payment on the \$15,000 church debt and his white friends could no longer help him.³³ His church was sold by the holders of the mortgage, and Griggs retreated in embarrassment to Denison, Texas, where he died on 2 January 1933 an intellectual in exile, "a despondent man, almost unwept, and unhonored."³⁴

33. Tabernacle Baptist Church v Universal Life, Griggs MSS (Griggs Business College, Memphis).

34. Blair T. Hunt to author, 17 February 1969; Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, 4 January 1933.

7

The Church of God in Christ

When people have been subjected to a life of misery and persecution, they tend to demand passionate religion.¹ Rather than searching for political and secular solutions, they would escape from the troubles of this world by dwelling on the rewards awaiting them in the next. Hence, scholarly ministers generally were not popular with the masses in Memphis for the poor and oppressed looked to the church for emotional fulfillment, not intellectual stimulation. Oppressed blacks for whom neither the rational race leadership of Reverends Griggs or Fuller had very much appeal, made their religious home in the city's shouting Baptist churches or with a more emotional pentecostal sect—the Church of God in Christ.

1. Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York: Knopf, 1963), 4; Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1959), 131-134.

The founder of this pentecostal holiness sect, Charles H. Mason, had been born on a plantation near Memphis in 1866. A sickly child, troubled by dreams and visions, he had prayed with his Baptist mother from a very early age, experiencing a dramatic conversion in the fall of 1880 when "the glory of God came down upon him" during a severe spell of chills and fever, and restored him immediately to health. At rural Baptist churches in east Arkansas, where his parents had moved, young Mason became a faithful congregation worker, singing and praying all night over souls at the altar. When a call to preach finally came at the age of twenty-seven, Mason, with only a fourth grade education, entered Arkansas Baptist College to become a better preacher; but he dropped out after only three months, explaining, "The Lord showed me that there was no salvation in schools and colleges; for the way they were conducted grieved my very soul. I packed my books and arose and bade them a final farewell, to follow Jesus, with the Bible as my sacred guide."²

Mason read his Scripture in the holiness direction, preaching that God offered not only the gift of conversion but a second blessing—sanctification—which purged the believer of all sin, making him pure. The Baptists regarded this doctrine of Christian perfection as heresy, but Elder Mason made it his foundation and began to call his following The Church of God in Christ. It was not until the Azusa Street revival a decade later, however, that Mason received the full baptism of the Holy Ghost and completed the official organization of his sect. For Mason's Church of God in Christ, as well as most other pentecostal denominations, Azusa Street in Los Angeles was their American Jerusalem.

William J. Seymour, a one-eyed black evangelist, began the great California revival in April 1906 preaching the new doctrine of a third blessing—baptism by the Holy Ghost and fire—

2. German R. Ross (ed.) *History and Formative Years of the Church of God in Christ with Excerpts from the Life and Works of its Founder—Bishop C. H. Mason* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1969), 16.

—which empowered saints to cast out devils, heal the sick, and speak in other tongues.³ When the Holy Ghost baptised a man, Seymour said, that man always spoke in languages he had never learned, just as the Apostles had done when the Holy Spirit descended on them.

When the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. Suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of rushing, mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting and there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with new tongues as the spirit gave them utterance. Acts 2:1-5

It was not long before those who had come together in Seymour's renovated livery stable on Azusa Street were chattering in foreign tongues and arousing the interest of the press. The startled Los Angeles *Times* reported, on April 18, that a "weird babel of tongues" had become the city's newest sect, and as the Azusa Street revival gained national attention, hundreds, both black and white, traveled to the integrated meetings in Los Angeles. Those who came found no choir, no hymns, no order of service, but only around-the-clock meetings where anyone moved by the Spirit could preach or sing, and an upstairs room where anxious pilgrims could pray for the Spirit. Once receiving the gift of tongues, the sanctified believers returned to their local community, carrying the message of pentecost.

3. Elder Seymour had learned the message from a white former Methodist Charles F. Parham, who taught the doctrine in 1905 at a Houston Bible school, Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 100-104; Morton T. Kelsey, *Tongue Speaking: an Experiment in Spiritual Experience* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1964). 61-64.

Elder Mason first learned of the great religious revival in 1906, and made the pilgrimage to the Azusa Street church in March of the following year. At first the speaking in tongues and other strange practices embarrassed the reserved black pastor, who had been brought up as a MidSouth Baptist; but the Lord spoke to Mason in the upper room and told him to forget about what others in Memphis might think and take baptism if he wished, to "let the people's right and wrongs all alone, and look to Him and not to the people . . ." ⁴

During a second night of prayer, Mason had a vision which reinforced what the Lord had said, and so, on the morning of the third day in the church, Mason determined to reach out his hands until God spoke to him once again. After a time, he felt himself being raised from his seat and surrendered himself to the Lord. As he later recalled, "there came a wave of glory into me, and all of my being was filled with the glory of the Lord . . . there came a light which enveloped my entire being above the brightness of the sun. When I opened my mouth to say glory, a flame touched my tongue which ran down in me. My language changed and no word could I speak in my own tongue. My soul was then satisfied." ⁵

After a month's stay on Azusa Street, Elder Mason returned to Memphis intent upon opening a great revival like that in Los Angeles. He began holding all night meetings from 7:30 in the evening until 6:30 the following morning in a small frame church on Wellington Street, and after five successful weeks, even the white Memphis press took notice. The *Commercial Appeal* covered the story under the headline, "Fanatical Worship of Negroes Going on at Sanctified Church,"

Some time ago Rev. Mason had a "visitation of the Holy Spirit" and began to speak the language used by the Spirit.

4. Ross, *History and Formative Years*, 18.

5. *Ibid.*, 19.

Then the test was applied to the congregation. If the members of his church could not speak and understand such language they were not sanctified, and could not be saved. This gave rise to one of the most remarkable religious fervors that has ever struck even the superstitious Negro church. The pastor pretended to speak the language of the Spirit and the wise ones of the congregation got on to his curves and began using a strange, idiotic jargon, which was alike meaningless to them and the preacher. As a matter of self-defense both the minister and the "wise ones" of his congregation pretended to understand each other, and the result was the language of the Spirit, which all "understand" and which is "meaningless" to all.

The minister would exclaim, "Hicks, hicks!" and the congregation would answer back, "Sycamore, sycamore, sycamore!" and such insignificant words, which lifted the congregation to the highest point of ecstasy, showing what has been contended for years, that the Negro's religion is sound instead of sense.⁶

Elder Mason would never have insisted that all tongues were real languages: the Scriptures point to both ecstatic speech and known languages as being gifts of the Spirit. But Mason did profess to have acquired the power to translate all varieties of tongues after seeking understanding through hours of prayer, and indeed, his friends remembered him as spending more time on his knees than on his feet. Elder Mason's prayers were answered, he said, when the Lord gave him the ability to "interpret sounds, groans and any kind of spiritual utterance."⁷

Some blacks ridiculed the new pentecostal phenomenon on Wellington Street, but hundreds from the masses were attracted to it by the magical powers of the Elder. At a time when the lower

6. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 22 May 2907.

7. Ross, *History and Formative Years*, 20.

classes still feared their spirits and "hants," there was considerable appeal in the all-night services where one could hear unknown languages, witness healings and the exorcising of devils, and examine the collection of misshapen potatoes and crooked roots which the Elder called examples of the "mystical wonder of God." When Mason was criticized for bringing magic into the church, he provided his justification by pointing to the Scriptures which, he said, made it clear that Jesus himself believed in healings, spirits, and demons.⁸

Beyond the appeal of its magical trappings, the music, dance, and song of its folk ritual made the masses feel at home on Wellington Street. Elder Mason, it was said, "had the original rhythm of colored peoples."⁹ Mason shouted and sang in the Afro-American tradition of the Spirituals, improvising lines and receiving spontaneous responses from his congregation, who rose to march in time to the music, swaying their bodies from side to side, arms and eyes raised heavenward. In the emotional intensity of the services it was not unusual for worshippers to experience tongue talking, trances, violent jerking, and uncontrollable shaking. These seizures were taken as proof that a person had been baptised by the Holy Ghost, and the hundreds who received the blessing arose shouting "Hallelujah! I am perfect."¹⁰

Elder Mason took pains to establish the Scriptural justification for his church ritual. The Bible had instructed man to "Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling," and Mason glossed

8. At Zion Cemetery, a decade earlier, black Memphians were still following the African custom of leaving objects on graves for the spirit of the deceased. If he had been a smoker, then tobacco, matches, and a pipe would be left for the spirit. For a child's grave, toys would keep the young spirit happy, *Commercial Appeal*, 29 July 1894; Fred L. Hutchins to author, 19 July 1970; interview with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, 9 February 1972.

9. "Church Celebrates 50th Anniversary," *Ebony* XIII (March 1958), 58.

10. *Commercial Appeal*, 25 May, 10 June 1907; *History and Formative Years*, 20.

the text with the help of one everyday simile: just as cold rain made the parched body shiver, so do we, who have had "the latter rain, that is, the Spirit poured out upon us," tremble; for "when dry bones hear and receive the word of the Lord they will shake."¹¹ In the same way, Mason catalogued Biblical texts to support dancing in the church:

The word of the Lord says: "Let them praise Him in the dance." Psa. 149:3, also 150:4

"Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together." Jer. 31:13

"When Israel's joy ceased her dance was turned to mourning." Lam. 5:15, Judges 21:21

"There is a time of dance or a time of dancing." Eph. 3:4

"David danced before the Lord with all his might." 2 Sam. 6:16

"We may sing and dance." 1 Sam. 21:1

"When God builds up his people as they are to be built up, then shall they go forth in the dance." Jer. 31:4

People may go and dance with the wrong purpose or object in view, as did Israel. Ex. 32:19

. . .

Dancing is mentioned four times in the New Testament. Christ himself making mention of it. Matt. 11:17; Luke 7:32. In the 15th chapter, 25th verse of Luke, Christ's parable of the prodigal son says he was received with music and dancing. Dancing here denotes or expresses joy. It is the parable of the heavenly joy over the repentance of one sinner. Dancing of the people of God is to be in the spirit of Jesus only, for as in Jesus only we rejoice and dance and praise God. We must have Jesus and all Jesus, Jesus in all things in the Church and His Saints.¹²

11. Ross, *History and Formative Years*, 37.

12. *Ibid.*, 36.

When his revival had been flourishing for more than four months, Elder Mason began steps to organize a sect in the new pentecostal style. He called a meeting of all black preachers in the Mid-South who believed in speaking in tongues as proof of baptism by the Holy Ghost, and at this, the first general assembly of the Church of God in Christ, Elder Mason was elected Chief Overseer. Elder D. J. Young, a former school teacher trained at Morehouse College, became editor of *The Whole Truth*, the official church newspaper. A centralized, presbyterian form of church government was approved with each local congregation permitted to have assemblies and exert some limited influence, while the general assembly of Elders would make Church policy. With this centralized organization Mason would see to it that his followers were led through earthly danger and into green pastures by "dedicated spirit-filled, God-given shepherds."¹³

Elder Mason's success and strength as a leader were enhanced by his humble and retiring nature. He regarded the Church as founded on Scripture, not the personal theology of C. H. Mason, and so he never dictated to his ministers: instead, he prayed and read the Bible with them. Mason maintained his position of leadership by saintly example and the practical decision to hold annual convocations with all ministers making the pilgrimage to Memphis. Each twenty-one day convocation began with a three day fast—no food or water—during which the Saints remained on their knees in prayer for at least six hours a day. The teaching and evangelism followed, accompanied by songs of praise, holy dances, utterances in the unknown tongues, and testimonies of divine cures. Just as Elder Mason merited his reputation as the most prayerful Saint, even remaining on his knees nine hours at a time, so did he work many miracles of healing and gain a reputation as the most gifted healer. Annual convocations with the Chief Overseer would always send the

13. *Ibid.*, 63.

clergymen back home to preach and pray that God and Elder Mason would soon bring a better day.¹⁴

Mason never believed the Chief Overseer should merely preach pentecost in Memphis and leave the rest of the world to his fellow apostles. He took seriously the Scriptural injunction of Acts 1:8 "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall witness unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth." Elder Mason himself carried the holiness doctrine far beyond the Mid-South: in 1907, for example, he traveled to Norfolk, Virginia, holding a three-week revival which planted the seed of pentecost on the east coast. Thus, when blacks began their migration north during the First World War, Church of God in Christ evangelists would travel with them, preaching holiness, telling the simple stories of the Bible, and offering religious joy and warmth not found in the established northern churches. By 1917 COGIC congregations were organized in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Brooklyn. Evangelists were also at work in Harlem, and in 1925 Elder Fletcher opened a storefront church at 137th and Lenox Avenue, placing Mason's message before the largest urban black population in America.¹⁵

While blacks from the South Atlantic states migrated to Harlem, Mid-South blacks moved north to St. Louis, Chicago, and Detroit with Mason and his evangelists close behind. One of the early holiness missionaries—V. M. Barker—had been a Pine Bluff, Arkansas, school teacher when he received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Baker left teaching to carry the word to St. Louis in 1908, establishing congregations there and in Kansas City. Other Mason apostles, such as Mother Lillian Coffey, moved on

14. Interview with Bishop J. S. Bailey, 10 April 1972; interview with Bishop S. M. Crouch, 12 April 1972.

15. Ithiel and Clara Clemmons, "History," in *Golden Jubilee 1921-1971, Churches of God in Christ, Eastern Jurisdiction* (pamphlet); interview with Mrs. Elsie W. Mason, 22 January 1974.

to Chicago while I. W. Winans and J. S. Bailey carried their witness to Detroit.¹⁶

The road to California ran through Texas which was evangelized by Mason, D. J. Young, and especially by E. M. Page. A former Memphis railroad worker and member of the A.M.E. Church, Page received the baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire in Mason's church and began as an evangelist in Mississippi. He was sent on the Texas in 1914, where as State Overseer he rapidly increased the number of congregations from twenty-five to eighty. When he first arrived in Texas none of the congregations had acquired property, but five years later the Dallas and Houston congregations alone had property worth \$10,000. By the mid-twenties, Texas contained 5,430 COGIC members, more than any other state.¹⁷

While other southern blacks moved north, Texans moved west to California and so did their ministers. S. M. Crouch, for example, learned holiness in Texas and carried the message back to California where William J. Seymour had first preached it in the Azusa Street revival. Elder Crouch began a distinguished Texas ministry in 1916, and became one of the first of his denomination to broadcast sermons when he preached on a Fort Worth radio station in 1924. He travelled to California to hold revivals during the twenties and would later, in 1930, be appointed State Overseer there. Even though the Azusa Street revival had begun it all, the Church of God in Christ counted only twenty-three California congregations in 1930, but by the closing years of Elder Crouch's career, more than 500 congregations existed and a daughter of William Seymour belonged to the Church of God in Christ.¹⁸

16. *The Whole Truth*, August 1969; Memphis *Tri-State Defender*, 20 June 1964; interview with Bishop J. S. Bailey, 10 April 1972.

17. Ross, *History and Formative Years*, 124-126; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States 1920-1932* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935), 538-555.

18. Interview with Bishop S. M. Crouch, 12 April 1972.

The Church of God in Christ grew beyond the boundaries of the United States during the nineteen-twenties. Women of the congregation organized a Home and Foreign Missionary Board in 1925, and two years later they sent Mrs. Mattie McCaulley of Tulsa to the West Indies as a missionary. Mrs. McCaulley carried the message to Trinidad, the Canal Zone, and Costa Rica. With the later assistance of Elder Cornelius Hall, the second COGIC missionary, the Church was permanently established in the West Indies. A second mission field opened in West Africa when Miss Elizabeth White, who had three years of experience in Liberia, converted to the Church of God in Christ in 1929. Miss White returned to Africa in 1930 for the Home and Foreign Mission Board.¹⁹

While Elder Mason's followers grew into a major Christian denomination they received little encouragement from either the white or the black establishment in Memphis. Recognition and encouragement, of course, were never sought by Mason. With Christ's second coming expected imminently Elder Mason and his Saints had no time for public relations or temporal affairs, and dismissed them as irrelevant to the main purpose of life, attaining salvation. The denomination did not seek newspaper publicity and received almost none. Even at the tenth annual convocation in 1917, when 800 delegates from twenty different states came to Memphis, the local press carried only the briefest announcement of the event.²⁰

Elder Mason and His Saints took the message of Jesus Christ so seriously that they were commonly regarded as religious fanatics. When America entered the First World War, for example, the Church of God in Christ did not rally around the war effort as did other denominations. Being committed to Christ's message of peace, Mason found himself a conspicuous opponent of the country's involvement in the hostilities. Mason did recognize the

19. Charles H. Pleas, *Fifty Years Achievement* (n.p., n.d.), 25-26.

20. *Commercial Appeal*, 5 December 1917.

Scriptural injunction to obey those in authority, and gave his endorsement of Liberty Bonds:²¹

Is it right to buy Liberty Bonds? Yes! Yes!

What does it mean to buy Liberty Bonds?

It means to lend your country a certain amount of money.

What says the Scriptures? Matt. 5:42, "Give to him that asketh thee, and from them that borrow of thee turn not away."

Brethren, we are living by every word of God—Matt. 4. Our government is asking us for a loan, and we are in no violation of God's word in granting it, and not only to loan, but loan, hoping for nothing to gain. Luke 6:35

But his position on the war itself was never compromised, and in the repressive, militaristic atmosphere of World War I Mason was often harassed, not in Memphis but in the small towns of the South. He described the situation this way:

The Holy Ghost through me was teaching men to look to God, for He is their only help. I told them not to trust in the power of the United States, England, France or Germany, but trust in God. The enemy (the devil) tried to hinder me from preaching the unadulterated word of God. He plotted against me and had the white people to arrest me and put me in jail for several days.²²

Once in Lexington, Mississippi, and again in Paris, Texas, the federal authorities charged Elder Mason with obstructing the draft and promoting the cause of Germany, and held him in jail. In both instances Mason prayed constantly, while his followers raised bail money, and he won prompt release from the au-

21. *History and Formative Years*, 26-28.

22. *Ibid.*, 23.

thorities, praising God for both his persecution and his deliverance. Both charges were dropped after the War, and Elder Mason was certainly more fortunate than one of his followers, Elder Jesse Payne, who was tarred and feathered in Blytheville, Arkansas for circulating Mason's literature with Biblical proof texts against war.²³

The unwavering commitment of Elder Mason and his followers to the Biblical message—which they committed to memory and quoted in great quantities—was undoubtedly impressive. A man who began each day with two hours of prayer, whose life was untouched by personal scandal, and who dressed plainly and simply could never be dismissed as a charlatan. Even though black Memphians were slow to join the Church of God in Christ, they acknowledged Elder Mason to be a sincere man of God. And as his local pastors gathered a larger flock of believers, the holiness movement gained popular respect. When the local Royal Circle Hospital failed in the mid-twenties, it was the Church of God in Christ which purchased the property on South Fifth Street for a new convocation center. When Reverend Sutton E. Griggs's congregation failed to pay their notes on the impressive Tabernacle Baptist Church, it was Mason's followers who purchased the building. Growth and financial success brought both respect for the denomination and more rapid local expansion. Only eight Memphis COGIC congregations existed in 1931 but four years later Mason had more than twenty local congregations, pushing his denomination past the eleven AME and the seventeen CME congregations. The Church of God in Christ still lagged far behind the Baptists in Memphis, but even Baptist Reverend T. O. Fuller would be forced to admit that the second largest Negro denomination in Memphis had "made splendid headway."²⁴

23. *Chicago Defender*, 29 June 1918; Charles Pleas, *Fifty Years Achievement*, 17; *Commercial Appeal*, 18 April 1918.

24. T. O. Fuller, *Pictorial History of the American Negro* (Memphis: Pictorial History, 1933), 72; *Memphis City Directory*; interview with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, 9 February 1972; interview with Mrs. Elsie W. Mason, 22 January 1974.

By the thirties the dynamic urban character of the Church of God in Christ had been established with seventy percent of the members living in urban areas. More than half of the membership still lived in the American South, to be sure, but the denomination had established congregations in every section of the nation, especially among the neglected poor of the northern ghettos. The souls of the black masses were stirred by the tambourine-playing, hand-clapping, frenzied dancing, tongue speaking, and screaming sermons of the pentecostal worship. But the Church of God in Christ gave congregations more than religious enthusiasm; the message of Christian fundamentalism gave members strength to endure and become self-reliant. The Church taught that doing the will of God in this world demanded a positive work ethic—diligence at the job, avoidance of distracting pleasures, and worldly achievement. After the great depression a Saint would rarely be seen begging bread, taking a drink, or seeking help from relief rolls. The moral strictness and emotional intensity of the members was a measure of the power which enabled this religious movement to become one of the largest black denominations in America.²⁵

25. *Tri-State Defender*, 25 November 1961; William Willoughby, "Storefront Churches: Social Stabilizers," *Christianity Today* XIII (9 May 1969), 44-45; Benton Johnson, "Do Holiness Sects Socialize in Dominant Values," *Social Forces* XXXIX (May 1961), 390-316.

8

Preachers and Protest

"The modern trend," concluded a Beale Street journalist, writing during the Great Depression, "seems to be towards unhorsing the black preacher from his traditional seat of racial leadership." Memphis and other communities saw the Negro church come under criticism for talking too much about how all God's children would surely get shoes in heaven, while doing almost nothing for the wretched poor who were left to go barefoot on earth. Preachers were regarded as "ignorance incarnate" by an increasing number of iconoclastic college age blacks who questioned the authority of the Bible and the time-honored leadership of the clergy. Educated classes ridiculed the churchmen relentlessly by telling stories of the storefront preacher Heck Mosby, who began every prayer with the words, "Oh Lord, Oh Boss Man," and the country exhorter on Beale Street whom they credited with this outrageously backward social analysis:

Lemme tell you 'somethin'—these 'niggers' talkin' about 'education' and organizin' and all this here 'new-gangle'

mess, but Brother, when they commenses to neglect their 'ligious' leaders and stop building more churches they is doomed. 'De trouble wit us is that we was freed from slavery too soon.¹

The ministry lagged so far behind black business and professional groups in supporting labor unionism and civil rights, that by the end of the thirties a black scholar, Ralph Bunche, could profile the leadership in Memphis without mentioning the clergy, except to criticize their inertia. "The Negro preachers of Memphis as a whole have avoided social questions," Bunche wrote. "They have preached thunder and lightning, fire and brimstone, and Moses out of the bullrushes, but about the economic and political exploitation of the Negro in Memphis they have remained silent. Their congregations have looked at them with eyes of suffering and Negro preachers in Memphis have turned from them and preached the virtues of Canaan."² Bunche, to be sure, penned a caricature rather than a description, but this parody would continue to trouble the clergy until the nineteen-fifties and the civil rights movement.

During these years when its stature diminished the black church shifted slowly but perceptibly in the direction of racial protest. Individual clergymen began to reflect the new militancy which emerged during World War II as black Americans recognized the hypocrisy of whites who could fight a war to end Nazi racism in Europe while ignoring racial discrimination at home in the American South. Church congregations also caught the new spirit of protest and censured pastors who clung to the old

1. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), 875; George W. Lee, *Beale Street: Where the Blues Began* (New York: Ballou, 1934), 161; *Memphis World*, 11 March, 6 September 1932.

2. Ralph J. Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," Carnegie-Myrdal Study of the Negro in America, 1940 (microfilm reproduced by New York Public Library), 1147-1148.

accommodating style. Certainly Reverend Arthur W. Womack of Collins Chapel C.M.E. was strongly criticized for a war time sermon in which he urged his congregation to buy government bonds and to praise the American way of life and the American white man.³

Memphis clergymen certainly did not rush into protest as a group. Until the fifties, never more than one or two ministers spoke up loudly enough to receive recognition from the black press. Only Reverend George Albert Long of Beale Street Baptist stood in defiance of the local Crump political machine during the war years. Reverend Long had come out of Phillips County, Arkansas where he began to preach at the age of fifteen. He studied at Arkansas Baptist College and then pastored churches in Illinois and Indiana before coming to Beale Street Baptist. Although Long had lived in the North, and took some interest in social issues, he had remained conservative in his adherence to religious fundamentalism and the Republican party. But even a conservative could be offended by the Crump machine's intimidation of the community, and after local black leaders were coerced into canceling a speaking invitation which had been extended to A. Philip Randolph, the major black protest spokesman of the forties, Reverend Long opened his church to Randolph. More than seven hundred black Memphians defied the machine by going to hear Randolph call Crump the arch enemy of freedom and equality who "out Hitlers Hitler." "Had I known," Sheriff Oliver Perry raged afterwards, that "the Negro Randolph from New York City, and those he brought with him, were to make blackguarding speeches defaming this community and speaking ill of my friends, Mr. Hale and Mr. Crump, I would have pulled them all out of the pulpit in Preacher Long's Beale Street Church." And from Boss Crump himself came the warning

3. Pittsburgh *Courier*, 10 October 1942; Richard M. Dalfiume, "The Forgotten Years of the Negro Revolution," *Journal of American History* LV (June 1968), 90-106.

that "if the Negroes in this community or any whites insist on these imported rabble rousers, creating hatred, they might as well make up their minds to abide by the consequences and the town will be better off without that type of citizen, including the preacher who gave permission to hold that meeting in his church." Yet Reverend Long stoutly replied in an open letter to the white press: "Christ, not Crump, is my Boss":

I am not an imported rabble rouser. I am an American citizen, born in Phillips County Ark. When Mr. E. H. Crump speaks of my abiding the consequences, I am fully cognizant of what he means. I have made up my mind.

Now, as far as the town being better off without me, I did not ask Mr. Crump could I come to this town, and I am not going to ask him if I may stay.

The issue raised by Mr. E. H. Crump in Memphis is the issue around the world—Freedom. Thousands of my group are dying around the world for that freedom. If they can take it there, I can take it here, although I must take it unarmed, but the pity of it is that men should have to die there for what is denied here.⁴

Reverend Long appears to have found his courage and theological support in the Biblical story of the creation. There, he pointed out, in the book of Genesis, man was given dominion over the earth and living things, but had not been given dominion over other men, and certainly not over other races. The earth, Long believed, belonged to all men, to blacks as well as whites; and he challenged his people:

As black men, are you going to sit supinely while men of other race groups dominate the earth? God, your Creator,

4. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 3 April 1944; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 March 1939; *Memphis World*, 11 November 1947.

is looking on. Quit yourselves like men, be strong, robust, be healthy, be compact, be fortified, be powerful, be not easily subdued, be courageous—be strong physically, mentally, financially, morally, spiritually; be strong in love.⁵

The Bible, Reverend Long insisted, encouraged militancy against discrimination, and he urged his fellow black Memphians to speak out and take their rightful place in Memphis, Tennessee. Practicing what he preached, Long charged publicly that discrimination existed in Mr. Crump's city:

The political set-up is not democratic. Negroes have helped in the development, but Negroes have no part in the ruling of Memphis. Negroes are not a part of the City Administration; not upon the Board of Education; he is not a policeman; he is not a fireman; he is discriminated against. The Negro is often beaten if he speaks and acts like a man. If the Negro stands for right, himself, and humanity, he is often told the city would be better off without him, or he is accused of making trouble between the race groups, or he is called a Communist, or he is haunted until he has to close his business or leave town.

I am told public conveyance is not good. Men with courage and race interest should seek a way to change these conditions. I am told homes are raided without warrants. Know your bill of rights, then seek protection according to the law. Let the men of Memphis study and know the laws of Memphis.⁶

A prophetic minister who preferred the Old Testament to the New, Reverend Long admired men of prophesy and action more than men of prayer and reflection. Long told A. Philip

5. *Memphis World*, 8 February 1944, 25 October 1946.

6. *Ibid.*, 25 October 1946.

Randolph: "I welcome you for what you are and stand for You are a man. . . I wish to heaven we had just a few men like you in Memphis."⁷ The assertion of black manhood in Memphis, however, could be costly, even for a minister. The city fire inspectors demanded that repairs costing thousands of dollars be made on Long's church; the Reverend was the victim of a physical assault, probably inspired by the organization. The harassment kept the congregation small and unable to pay off the church debt, and by 1947 the outspoken minister had moved north to Detroit.⁸

Reverend Long had spoken for himself and not for any protest organization. Even though a Baptist he did not belong to the regular National Baptist Convention with which most Memphis Baptists were affiliated. By taking his congregation out of the regular N.B.C., Reverend Long had cut himself off from other local ministers and taken an independent role. Neither did he participate in the Urban League or the NAACP. But while Long had remained isolated, the outspoken ministers who followed were affiliated with the NAACP and mainline denominations, reflecting the increased local militancy where the NAACP membership had grown from 400 to more than 4,000 by the end of the war.

The A.M.E. transferred Reverend Dwight V. Kyle to Memphis in 1944 where he joined the NAACP executive committee and ran for Congress in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket. "I am for total equality for the Negro," Kyle said. "I favor complete integration of the Negro into American life as a citizen and an individual."⁹ Reverend Kyle received only four thousand votes but restored the tradition of blacks announcing for public office.

7. *Ibid.*, 23 September 1947.

8. *Monthly Summary of Events and Trends in Race Relations I* (May 1944), 6; *Memphis World*, 2 January 1945, 11 November 1947.

9. *Memphis World*, 12 October 1948; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 2 November 1948.

And when Kyle left Memphis other local ministers stepped into his protest role, including Baptist Reverend Van J. Malone who, in 1954, became the first minister to preside over the Memphis chapter of the NAACP.¹⁰ Encouraged by the Supreme Court school desegregation decision, the majority of local ministers became outspoken civil rights advocates, even Reverend Roy Love, president of the local Baptist Ministers' Alliance.

Reverend Love had come up from rural Mississippi with a seventh grade education, and become a factory laborer in 1918. It was during his nine years tenure with the Desota Hardwood Flooring Company that he became assistant pastor of the small sixty-eight member Mt. Nebo Baptist Church. When the old minister died in 1926, Reverend Love took over the pulpit. At the urging of his working-class congregation, the new pastor returned to school, enrolling at T. O. Fuller's Howe Institute at the eighth grade level and eventually earning his Howe degree. Reverend Love was never the most erudite local Baptist clergyman, but as his shouting congregation swelled to more than a thousand members he emerged a powerful minister, exerting considerable influence over the scores of less educated clergy, and enjoying the friendship of the more scholarly S. A. Owen and E. McEwen Williams, pastors of the "high rise" Metropolitan and St. John Baptist churches. A congenial man who avoided friction, Reverend Love took out membership but did not participate actively in the NAACP. He leaned toward the Democratic party but never broke his old ties with the Republicans. "I kind of hold hands with both," was the way he explained his political position. Popular and resilient, Roy Love was the choice of the local black politicians who decided to draft a preacher and involve the churches in a united civil rights effort to increase the number of Negro voters.¹¹

10. Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, 4 January 1954; *Tri-State Defender*, 16 January 1954.

11. Interview with Reverend Roy Love, 4 February 1970; Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, 17 August 1955.

The two insurance executives who monopolized black politics in the 1950s, Republican Lt. George W. Lee and Democratic Dr. J. E. Walker, worked together to double black voter registration. They saw this as a means of both increasing their own power in the community and of pressuring white Memphis politicians to begin racial desegregation. Blacks had always voted in Memphis but many, especially the flood of Mississippi emigres, did not register to vote and so the politicians decided to enter Reverend Love in the school board race and actively involve the clergy in both the campaign and the voter registration. Politicians reckoned that ninety percent of the city's black adults held membership in at least one of the 250 local churches, so that the clergy must hold the keys to the unregistered voters.¹²

The politicians convened a small meeting of two dozen community leaders to endorse Reverend Love on 17 August 1955 and then arranged the largest local leadership assembly in a quarter of a century, where two hundred ministers and secular leaders came together at the Pentecostal Temple Church of God in Christ. Honoring the request of Lt. Lee and Dr. Walker, churchmen from all the black denominations put aside their rivalries and organized a Ministers and Citizens League. They approved a \$2,000 registration budget, hired three full-time secretaries, and pledged their automobiles and their churches to the work of doubling the number of registered black voters for a total of 60,000.¹³

Dr. Walker nominated a new C.M.E. minister, Reverend Henry Clay Bunton, to preside over the Ministers and Citizens League. Bunton reflected the changes which had taken place in his denomination as many of the members and bishops made an exodus out of the segregated South. The first bishop to relocate settled in St. Louis in 1920, and twenty-five years later half of the

12. Interview with Bishop Henry C. Bunton, 29 June 1972.

13. *Memphis World*, 19 August 1955; *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 17 August, 29 September 1955; *Tri-State Defender*, 10 September 1955.

church bishops lived outside the South. Although the denomination headquarters remained in West Tennessee, its weekly *Christian Index* began to urge that blacks support the NAACP and speak against Jim Crow. Growing sentiment for equality led to an assault on the very name of the denomination. "It is embarrassing enough to see 'colored cafe,' 'colored seat,' 'colored drinking fountain,' 'colored toilet,'" Reverend Henry C. Bunton had complained in a 1948 letter to the *Christian Index*, "but when it comes to 'colored church' embarrassment does not describe the dire implications involved." C.M.E. ministers agreed that none of God's churches should be divided by segregation, and at the 1954 General Conference the denomination changed its name to the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Thus the period of apparent inactivity during the thirties and forties was in fact a time of growing militancy for the denomination. As a result, northern trained C.M.E. pastors provided much of the local leadership in the Memphis desegregation movement of the fifties.¹⁴

Bunton wore a stiff clerical collar, held a prestigious graduate degree from Denver's Iliff School of Theology, and still managed to be one of the least pretentious men in the local clergy, apparently never losing sight of his humble beginnings: he had studied in a little one-room school in rural Alabama, finished the five grades, married, and reached the age of twenty-one before deciding upon the ministry. In 1925 the C.M.E. Church admitted him to the pulpit on the condition that he would go back to school; so Bunton moved his wife and two children with him to Birmingham where he began a pastorate in a church of seven members, enrolled in the sixth grade at Miles College, and supported his family with farm work and odd jobs. From then on he attended school wherever he was assigned a new church, and finally earned

14. Interview with Reverend Dewitt T. Alcorn, 16 March 1972; interview with Professor O. T. Peebles, 16 May 1972; *Christian Index*, 23 September 1920, 28 March 1935, 5 February 1948, 20 May, 26 August 1954.

a B.A. at Florida A. & M. in 1941. After serving as an Army chaplain in Europe, an experience which expanded his horizons enormously, Bunton pastored in Dallas and Denver, took graduate courses at Southern Methodist University, and earned a Masters degree in Theology from Iliff. In November 1953 Bunton came to Memphis as pastor of the largest local C.M.E. congregation, Mt. Olive Cathedral.¹⁵

Election to the presidency of the Ministers and Citizens League came as a surprise to Reverend Bunton who was totally unaware that he had been made the politicians' choice, and even sought to decline the nomination. Once elected (without opposition), however, he took up his role with dedication and made Mt. Olive the headquarters for the voter registration drive. "It is necessary to prove yourself good citizens by registering," Bunton told his congregation. "If more of us register, it will mean more consideration. I feel a person can be a better Christian by being a better citizen, and that means registering to vote."¹⁶ Bunton defended his political role and stressed that all southern churches should push civil rights even if it brought danger to the church. "We know in some parts of the country it is not safe even for the church to take a stand against social evils," he said, "but we must remember whenever the church seeks to save its life, it loses it."¹⁷

Bunton and the other Memphis ministers preached citizenship, conducted mass meetings, and drove unregistered parishioners to the Court House, yet they managed to add only five thousand names to the registration lists, raising the potential black vote to a mere 39,000. On election day only half this number showed up at the polls, and school board candidate Roy Love, even with some white support, received only 20,082 votes, five thousand less than his opposition. Whereas some new black resi-

15. Interview with Bishop Bunton, 29 June 1972; interview with Reverend Alcorn, 9 February 1972; *Tri-State Defender*, 15 August 1959.

16. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 10 October 1955.

17. *Christian Index*, 17 November 1955.

dents in Memphis determined to exercise those voting rights which had been denied them in Mississippi, others were so delighted with the better life they now lived, that for fear of rocking the boat they simply refused to vote, and hoped their black neighbors would also have the sense to leave well enough alone.¹⁸

Even though black Memphians failed to elect Reverend Love to the school board, they did show their strength by providing the decisive votes to elect whites they wanted for other city government positions. With this encouragement the Ministers and Citizens League continued its voter registration work and remained the major Memphis pressure group for desegregation. It worked closely with the local branch of the NAACP which in 1955 initiated an integration case against Memphis State College, and in 1956 supported court action against the local buses. At first the organizations sought movement only towards "orderly integration" in limited areas, hoping that voter registration and negotiation with white leaders on the Race Relations Committee could open other doors without igniting white extremist sentiment. It was not until the late fifties that black Memphians finally lost patience, filed suits to open the public libraries (1958), and the public parks (1959), and desegregate the public schools (1960).¹⁹

With black registration up to 50,000 by 1959, Reverend Bunton decided to make a bid himself for a seat on the school board, this time pushing a little harder for desegregation, and using the campaign more as a means of increasing black awareness than of winning an elected post. Bunton joined other Negro candidates—Reverend Roy Love and attorneys Ben Hooks and Russell Sugarmon—on a black ticket supported by all the religious, civic, and business leaders. This coalition raised a \$20,000

18. *Press-Scimitar*, 11 November 1955; interview with Bishop Bunton, 29 June 1972.

19. *Tri-State Defender*, 25 February, 31 March 1956; *Press-Scimitar*, 3 April 1960.

campaign fund, organized mass rallies with such speakers as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and generally did what they could to make unregistered Negroes feel uncomfortable in church and Uncle Tom ministers out of step with their community. When two or three of the city's four hundred black preachers accepted money from white politicians, attorney and Baptist minister Ben Hooks threatened them with public exposure. "There are a lot of traitorous Negro ministers in Memphis," Hooks warned in a speech at Mt. Olive Cathedral. "I know a lot of you. Some of you are seated in this very audience. And if you start your traitorous selling the Negro out during this election, I am going to buy radio time and reveal your names."²⁰

Black disunity was intolerable in a city which remained completely segregated and without a single black elected official. Negroes now had a real chance to win office, and the black candidates were determined to get all their folk out to the polls, down to the last of the few thousand cotton pickers who rode out of the city early in the mornings to their jobs in the Arkansas delta. In an hour long radio program on the eve of the election, Reverend Hooks asked those voters to "miss those cotton trucks tomorrow." "Freedom is better than money," he told them. "Better to be broke and hungry and be free than to have money in the pocket and food on the table and be a slave."²¹ Reverend Roy Love promised to pray hard for rain so the cotton trucks wouldn't even go out.

On election morning, forty black churches across the city held sunrise prayer services. At Mt. Moriah Baptist Church Reverend R. W. Norsworthy intoned: "We thank thee, Oh God, that in this world-wide, upsurge of suppressed and under-

20. *Memphis World*, 11 July 1959; William E. Wright, *Memphis Politics: A Study in Bloc Voting* (Eagleton Institute Cases in Practical Politics) (New York: McGraw Hill, 1962); interview with Bishop Bunton, 29 June 1972.

21. *Commercial Appeal*, 20 August 1959.

privileged people to gain for themselves dignity and respect, you have given them something to make them seek and fight in the name of Jesus for freedom."²² After they had prayed for freedom, and breakfasted in the church cafeterias, the black community turned out to vote in record numbers. Unhappily, the turnout was even stronger in alarmed white neighborhoods and the black slate lost by more than twenty thousand votes. The churches won much acclaim, however, for having been at the center of the movement to give blacks a political voice. "Negro preachers and pastors," the Memphis *Tri-State Defender* said, "cut a higher niche for themselves in the estimation of increasingly questioning and demanding congregations. Many representative ministers welcomed the chance to join their followers in reaching for some of the world as well as Jesus. A lot of Negro church goers liked the change. They were agreeably surprised to see a new facet of the minister's capacity for leadership."²³

Back in 1955 the clergy had joined the Ministers and Citizens League at the insistence of black politicians, but now that the clergy had grown confident in their role as community leaders, they were less dependent upon their political allies. When the student sit-in movement came to Memphis in March 1960 ministers immediately endorsed the protest without waiting to see what the politicians would do. The arrest of forty-one Owen and LeMoyne college students on Saturday afternoon, March 19, for entering two public libraries, prompted Reverend D. S. Cunningham, pastor of C.M.E. Collins Chapel and president of the Memphis NAACP, to call an emergency meeting at once and the seventy ministers who attended voted overwhelmingly to endorse the students and pledge financial support. At the suggestion of A.M.E. Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, the group drove en

22. *Press-Scimitar*, 20 August 1959.

23. *Tri-State Defender*, 29 August 1959; *Commercial Appeal*, 21 August 1959.

masse to the city jail where they remained until the last demonstrator had been released on bail.²⁴

During church services the following morning, ministers like Reverend D. W. Browning of Mt. Pisgah C.M.E. called on their congregations to make special "freedom donations" to pay the students' fines. Browning asked his people to "put their Easter bonnet on the altar," to do without new Easter outfits and use the money instead to finance the fight for freedom. "I'd rather be dressed like a pauper and have a sense of dignity and honor than be dressed as a prince and treated as a slave," Browning said. He urged the congregation to support the nonviolent students who now faced the outrageous charges of disorderly conduct, loitering, and threatening to disturb the peace, because they had dared to use the public library.²⁵

Blacks filled the police station to capacity the next day and two thousand more, who were turned away, marched to a meeting at Mt. Olive Cathedral, singing "Glory, Glory, Hallelujah." "Oh, Lord," Reverend Cunningham prayed, "our children have been locked up in jail not because they are criminals, but because they have tried to gain their rights. Oh, Lord, you have heard us in the past. As in the past, hear us now. We are at the crossroads. We have fought on every battlefield of this country. We have fought every battle but our own."²⁶ The crowd responded with a chorus of "amens," and the ministers resolved to join their forces with the NAACP and lead their people in the fight for black equality. That very evening a hundred clergymen and two thousand laymen met and approved an economic boycott of downtown merchants. At first, blacks were asked to avoid shopping in the district on Mondays and Thursdays, but at a meeting nine days later, attended by almost five thousand soul brothers, it

24. Interview with Reverend D. S. Cunningham, 17 May 1972; *Commercial Appeal*, 19, 20 March 1960.

25. *Commercial Appeal*, 121 March 1960.

26. *Ibid.*, 21, 22 March 1960; *Press-Scimitar*, 30 March 1960.

was agreed to extend the boycott by staying away from the downtown area altogether.

Reverend Cunningham's NAACP chapter organized daily picket lines to protest discrimination at downtown lunch-counters; the students extended their sit-ins to the large department stores; and churches held "freedom marches" every Sunday where members left their pews and presented themselves at the front of their churches to donate what they could to a fund for paying fines of arrested protestors. As picketing and sit-ins continued throughout the summer, a twenty-six year old seminary-trained Baptist, the Reverend Samuel B. Kyles, urged pastors to taken an even great role, by leading sit-ins, kneel-ins, and walk-ins themselves, and suffering the inevitable arrest. Fellow Baptist ministers were sympathetic to Billy Kyles but only Reverend J. L. Netters would join Kyles in taking front seats on city buses and going to jail afterwards. Nevertheless, what adult leadership there was encouraged increasing numbers of young blacks to invade lunch counters, city parks, and even white churches.²⁷

By the fall of 1960 segregation began to give way in Memphis. Buses were desegregated in September, libraries in October, and Overton Park Zoo in December. The downtown merchants still refused to budge, hoping to talk key ministers into abandoning the movement, but the clergy continued to replenish their fund—to the tune of \$20,000 in 1960—for attorney's fees and demonstrator fines, and generally grew bolder in their protest activity. By December even the more cautious Reverend Love joined a party of blacks for dinner, with \$100 bail money in his pocket, intending to be arrested at the Goldsmith's Department Store restaurant. Ironically, the store manager chose simply to ignore the preacher and his friends, without having them served with either arrest or dinner.²⁸

27. *Tri-State Defender*, 23 April 28 May, 27 August 1960.

28. *Press-Scimitar*, 15 September, 14 October, 3 December 1960; *Tri-State Defender*, 10 December 1960; interview with Reverend Love, 4 February 1970.

Roy Love and other conservative Baptist ministers like him stayed in the movement. "I'm in it up to my elbows, walk-in, sit-in, or stand-in, I'm ready," Love said. Still, the clergy's role in this protest activity did create a split within the National Baptist Convention. At the center of the conflict was president of the NBC, Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, who spoke out against the sit-ins and then refused to permit an open vote on his reelection in the 1960 convention. When the civil rights Baptist faction, organized around Reverends Gardner C. Taylor and Martin Luther King, Jr., failed to defeat the Jackson machine in 1961, they organized their own Progressive Baptist Convention.²⁹

The more educated and socially conscious Memphis Baptist ministers—activists such as Ben Hooks, Billy Kyles, J. L. Netters, and the highly respected S. A. Owen—abandoned Jackson's NBC and switched to the new convention. Reverend Owen had been called to Metropolitan Baptist Church in 1923 after studying at the University of Chicago Divinity School and serving as president of Roger Williams College. Despite his concern with social problems, his long-time NAACP membership, and his Chicago theological education, Owen was a Biblical conservative like his father, an ex-slave preacher who had also pastored at Metropolitan. He never aspired to be "a big leader," but wanted only to minister to his people. Indeed, he so devoted himself to the interests of his congregation, which he had built into one of the largest and most respectable in Memphis, that the Interdenominational Ministers' Alliance later named him the "Minister of all

29. *Tri-State Defender*, 28 January 1961; Edward Peeks, *The Long Struggle for Black Power* (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1971), 311-313; *Pittsburgh Courier*, 17 September, 24 December 1960; 21, 28 January, 4 February, 16, 23 September 1961; the National Baptist Convention claimed five and a half million members, the Progressive convention a half million, and an earlier split, the Boyd National Baptist Convention of America, two and a half million. On the state level black Baptists were divided between Owen's Missionary and Educational Baptist Convention which supported a college and the Tennessee Regular Baptist Convention which gave nothing to education.

time." Nevertheless, Owen's colleagues elected him time and again to the presidency of the Tennessee Missionary and Educational Baptist Convention, and in 1953 made him vice-president of the National Baptist Convention on a reform ticket with Joseph H. Jackson. Unfortunately Jackson had promised that if elected he would serve only four years, then arrogantly dismissed his campaign promise and refused to relinquish the presidency. Unable to tolerate Jackson's lack of principle, dictatorial methods, and his shabby criticism of Martin Luther King, Jr., Owen decided to leave the National Baptist Convention.³⁰

The Baptist split might have been more damaging to the civil rights effort in Memphis had it not been for the great personal charm and intelligent leadership of S. A. Owen, who insisted that even though Baptists might be divided on the national level, they must work together locally in support of civil rights and their denominational college. If Owen had been a less godly or a vengeful man, he probably would have endeavored to lead all the Tennessee ministers out of the National Baptist Convention, but he made no attempt to influence those who wished to remain with Jackson, so that only five percent of the local Baptists joined the new national convention and Memphis Baptists averted a major splintering within the local community.³¹

Throughout 1961 the Memphis ministers supported boycotts, picketing, sit-ins, and weekly marches downtown. In response to sustained pressure, a drugstore and two department stores first closed down their lunch counters entirely, but by November the city merchants had finally capitulated to black demands, promising to take steps to desegregate their eating places and restrooms as soon as possible. On 6 February 1962 downtown Memphis quietly desegregated, and blacks as well as whites were gratified that after two years of bitter, but nonviolent

30. *Commercial Appeal*, 21 May 1967; interview with Reverend S. A. Owen, 25 August 1970.

31. Interview with Reverend S. B. Kyles, 1 June 1972.

controversy, their city had turned the corner in race relations. Blacks were convinced that substantial gains had been won only because their community leaders had been united. Memphians had not had to call on SNCC, SCLC, or CORE, because all had "joined in, the younger people, the business leaders, the ministers" ³²

The clergy emerged from the desegregation battles with laurels and a new image. No group, except the attorneys, had so completely supported the integration movement. In Memphis, and across the South, churchmen had cancelled "the stereotype of pompous behavior, fried chicken and expensive cars with which they were once identified." ³³ No longer did the middle-class question the value of church. The old debate about religious enthusiasm might continue, but it would be treated differently, the question now being whether congregation shouting was in good taste, rather than whether the preachers were using emotionalism to avoid social issues. ³⁴

32. *New York Times*, 16 February 1962; *Press-Scimitar*, 6 February 1962.

33. C. Eric Lincoln, "Key Man of the South—The Negro Minister," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 July 1964, 20.

34. *Tri-State Defender*, 11 February 1961, 9 June 1962.

9

Reverend James M. Lawson Jr. and the Garbage Strike

Just when Memphis clergymen were finally able to take some measure of satisfaction in their desegregation efforts, a young black minister moved into the city complaining that little real progress had been made. Reverend James M. Lawson Jr. dismissed the small sit-ins, court cases, and scattered picketing as “timid” and “almost useless policies,” and charged that the leaders in Memphis had neither eliminated white racism nor established black equality, and would have to adopt the massive confrontation politics of the SCLC if they were ever to unify their community and force white accommodation.

Lawson had been born in Ohio in 1928, the son of a militant United Methodist minister and a proud black woman from Jamaica. His father, who inclined toward Old Testament ideas about justice and had once worn a .38-caliber pistol on his hip while pastoring in the South, had organized NAACP and Urban League chapters in northern towns where none had existed.

Young Lawson was thus brought up not to turn the other cheek but to be a man and fight back when he had to. Indeed, when the school boys wanted a fight to size up the new preacher's kid, the elder Lawson sent his reluctant son out and ordered him to put up his fists.¹

James Lawson Jr. went on to continue his father's campaign against racial injustice, though he turned from physical force to the weapons of non-violence. From his reading of the New Testament, young Lawson could not reconcile violence with Christianity, a problem he confronted in high school debates over the merits of "Compulsory Universal Military Training" and "War with Russia." The very bright and articulate Ohio debater had also made an emotional commitment to Christ and His kingdom, becoming a local Methodist preacher in 1947, the year he graduated from high school. Lawson's pacifism was reinforced at his predominately white Baldwin-Wallace College where faculty members, including a few who had been conscientious objectors during World War II, sponsored an active chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the oldest pacifist organization in America. As a Negro, Lawson was also responsive to A. Philip Randolph's injunction that blacks refuse to cooperate with the draft until the armed forces ended their policies of racial segregation. Then A. J. Muste, the well-known pacifist, came to speak at Baldwin-Wallace. After earlier careers, first as a Congregational minister and then as a labor leader, Muste had become executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Muste denounced America's cold war policies and then explained that the FOR advocated not passive resignation to war and injustice, but aggressive action to force confrontations and discussions; and he urged his young listeners to refuse to cooperate with the system

1. James M. Lawson Jr. interviews, Memphis Search for Meaning Committee files (Mississippi Valley Collection, Brister Library, Memphis State University).

by refusing to register and going to jail if it came to that, instead of avoiding the draft by obtaining a C.O. classification.²

Lawson later remembered how Muste "handled a violent heckler easily and gently, and besides, he made excellent sense."³ Indeed the young minister was so profoundly impressed by Muste's philosophy of nonviolence that he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Lawson reasoned that nonviolent resistance was the most effective means of correcting human injustices, and the church the most effective vehicle for conveying this message. Once it was shown that Muste's secular ideas might as easily have come from Jesus of Nazareth, congregations would develop a passionate concern with the life of the world and the welfare of their neighbors.

As a Methodist pastor, Lawson could easily have been granted a ministerial deferment from his draft board, but he refused to cooperate with the system, and in 1951 he was sentenced to three years in jail for violating the Selective Service Act. Lawson served thirteen months in prison before he was paroled, and the Methodist Board of Missions sent him to India. He would have preferred a mission in Africa but none was available and so Lawson remained director of athletics and campus minister at Hislop College in Nagpur for three years. He was still in India when the civil rights movement began in the American South, and remembered years later his exuberance when he read of the Montgomery bus boycott. He had long dreamed of the day when southern blacks would refuse to cooperate with the racist system, and it looked as if that day had finally come.

Upon his return to the United States in 1956, Lawson began work for a theological degree at the Oberlin school of religion; but before he had completed his course of study, the southern

2. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 15 February 1973.

3. Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A. J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 110.

school desegregation crisis of 1957 and a dinner discussion with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. turned him from theological scholarship to direct involvement in the nonviolent struggle for southern desegregation. Lawson had lost patience with developing the idea of nonviolence in the abstract, and wanted to put the concept to use against southern racism.

Lawson dropped out of Oberlin in the winter 1957-58, discussed his plans with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and was offered a position as southern secretary for FOR. The organization, long an advocate of integration, instructed Lawson to open an office in Nashville for spreading the message of nonviolent resistance among southern blacks. Lawson would join Reverend Glenn Smiley, a white Methodist from Texas, and Reverend Ralph Abernathy from the Montgomery bus boycott, to hold nonviolent seminars and workshops at black colleges and churches in eight southern states. The team distributed a comic book, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*; and as a main text, they used Richard B. Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, a study of Gandhi's methods for giving the nonviolent man the moral initiative and destroying the self-confidence of his violent opponent. The Gregg study had been revised specially for Negroes in the South, with a new chapter on the Montgomery movement and an introduction by Martin Luther King. With these materials, Lawson's team spread the word that instead of waiting for the system to improve or waiting for divine intervention, blacks must get themselves together and nonviolently force the changes they wanted.⁴

After devoting the spring of 1958 to FOR organizing, Lawson enrolled in Vanderbilt Divinity School, and continued his missionary work part-time. On Tuesday nights, Lawson led integrated discussion groups of fifteen or twenty students from Fisk,

4. William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), 65-66; *Commercial Appeal*, 9 April 1969; Lawson interviews.

American Baptist Theological Seminary, and Vanderbilt, the topics being Jesus Christ, Gandhi, and nonviolent methods of fighting segregation. Lawson argued that the legal, middle-class NAACP procedures had been too slow, and that they needed to organize some dramatic activity which would move things faster. Lawson's group began their first sit-ins two months before the lunch counter protest in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is generally credited with touching off the southern sit-in movement. In November of 1959 Lawson and four or five from his discussion group began to go into downtown Nashville, testing the segregated lunch counters and engaging managers in a dialogue about the discriminatory policy. These small sit-ins, which never disrupted business and were ended whenever management turned hostile, continued into December and were then suspended for Christmas and semester examinations. Before the sit-ins were resumed on a larger scale, four Greensboro students received national publicity which credited them with starting the sit-in movement on 1 February 1960.

The Nashville group returned to the lunchcounters on February 13, with a hundred students from Fisk, Tennessee A. & I., and the American Baptist Theological Seminary, hitting Woolworth, Kress, and McClellan during the Saturday noon rush hour. All seats were occupied, management shut down the counters, and the sit-in was called off without incident. The following Saturday more than two hundred participated in the sit-ins which again shut down lunch counters and drove merchants to ask the mayor for police arrests to end any further demonstrations. On the following Saturday, February 27, Lawson's group, aware of a changed sentiment at city hall, had prepared for the worst. A special battle plan divided the 500 volunteers into small groups ready to replace each shift as it was arrested. Lawson's nonviolent army provided models of politeness as they took seats at downtown lunch counters, but their presence was enough to provoke physical assaults by enraged white customers. As local police moved in and arrested the demonstrators, other students took

their places until eighty had been arrested, the police could take no more into custody, and management closed the stores. With this, attention had at last been called to segregated facilities in downtown Nashville and a confrontation over segregation followed.⁵

On Monday morning Mayor Ben West met concerned black ministers of Nashville in the First Baptist Church, seeking to defend his Saturday arrests as an impartial enforcement of the law. Mayor West explained that after downtown merchants had requested that blacks stop sitting at lunch counters, and the students had refused to move, arrest had been the only alternative. But an angry Jim Lawson blasted the mayor, accusing him of using the law as "a gimmick" for oppressing people. "To prevent oppression," Lawson said, "we are not afraid to suffer arrest." Mayor West retorted, "you want to start a blood bath."

The segregationists naturally directed their hostility to the outside agitator from Ohio, and his Fellowship of Reconciliation, which had planned the protests ahead of time. "God forbid," the local Nashville *Banner* editorialized, "that the Divinity School or any other unit of Vanderbilt University should become the spawning ground for anarchy or the haven of scofflaws and disturbers of the peace who abuse the privileges of student enrollment afforded in good faith and conscience by a great university."⁶ There was no hope for peaceful race relations, the *Banner* contended, so long as Vanderbilt gave Lawson sanctuary. Since the publisher of the *Banner* held a position on the Vanderbilt board of trustees, it was no surprise when University Chancellor Harvie Branscomb insisted that Lawson desist from his

5. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 15 February 1973; Woodrow Geier, "Sit-ins Prod a Community," *Christian Century* LXXVII (30 March 1960), 379-382; Nashville *Tennessean*, (28 February 1960); *New York Times* (March 1960), David Halberstam, "A Good City Gone Ugly," *The Reporter* XXII (31 March 1960), 18.

6. Nashville *Banner*, 2 March 1960.

controversial activities; and when Lawson refused to compromise his principles of civil disobedience, he was promptly dismissed from the University. Ironically this very action brought even greater pressure on Nashville segregationists; for the dismissal so angered the faculty of the Divinity School that the dean and fourteen of the sixteen professors resigned to protest the expulsion of a good student who had merely followed the dictates of his conscience. When the Lawson incident began to receive national attention, the adverse publicity compounded local pressures enough to force the University to rescind its action and make the business community accept desegregation.⁷ Now Lawson had concrete proof of the efficacy of nonviolent confrontation.

It was during the Nashville crisis that Lawson helped organize a new direct action group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, for the purpose of extending direct nonviolent confrontation throughout the South.⁸ When the founding convention of SNCC met in Raleigh, North Carolina, in the spring of 1960, Lawson delivered the opening speech to the two hundred delegates. He championed the sit-in movement as the only way of exposing the white segregationists' sin of racial pride and successfully breaking down racial barriers. Unlike the NAACP, the Negro church, and interracial agencies, which were cautious and thus largely ineffectual, the sit-in movement told white folk: "Get moving. The pace of social change is too slow."⁹ Lawson guided the convention to a statement of purpose reflecting the principles of nonviolent direct action:

7. J. Robert Nelson, "Vanderbilt's Time of Testing," *Christian Century* LXXVII (10 August 1960), 921-925; see also items on 16, 23 March; 13 April, 15, 29 June 1960.

8. Paul Good, "Odyssey of a Man—And a Movement," *New York Times Magazine* (25 June 1967), 44; Irving Howe, "The First Generation of SNCC," *Dissent* XIV (July 1967), 461-462.

9. Francis L. Broderick and August Meier (eds.) *Negro Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), 274-281.

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of non-violence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Non-violence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice becomes actual possibilities.¹⁰

Despite Lawson's role in conceiving SNCC, he did not assume the leadership of the new organization as some had expected but decided to complete the work for his theological degree. Boston University honored all of his earlier academic credits and granted him a bachelor of theology after only a summer's residence. Returning South, Lawson accepted a pastorate of Scott Methodist Church in Shelbyville, Tennessee, where for two years he served his congregation and supervised the

10. *Ibid.*, 273-274.

construction of their new church edifice. Then in 1962 his bishop promoted him to a much larger urban church in Memphis, a city which by now had grown to more than half a million residents.

Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis dated back to 1866, when Reverend L. Hawkins, a white northern Methodist pastor, had gathered a black congregation and built them a church and free school.¹¹ Though Centenary received a black minister the following year, it retained its affiliation with the white northern Methodist Church and continued as one of the more intellectual Negro churches in Memphis. Over the years the membership grew to more than six hundred; and while the congregation included welfare recipients as well as black professionals, the services were middle-class with dignified hymns and no "amen corner." Indeed, Lawson found the congregation somewhat too "ingrown and comfortable;" but they were not unwilling to support his civil rights activism in Memphis.¹²

Lawson joined the local NAACP and urged the leaders to adopt massive confrontation politics; but to his dismay, only two NAACP board members—attorney A. W. Willis and banker Jesse Turner—were ready to move in this direction. The Memphis clergy might admire Lawson's brilliance and his northern accent, but most were not ready for the kind of direct mass action that was to take place in the Birmingham SCLC campaign the next year. So Lawson joined Martin Luther King in Alabama that spring as an SCLC staff member and conducted training sessions for the volunteers who joined the nonviolent crusade. It was Lawson who drafted the pledge card which every volunteer signed before marching for the movement.¹³ Lawson returned home exuberant after the desegregation victory in Birmingham, and impatient to implement direct action tactics in Memphis. In his Sunday

11. *Memphis Post*, 4 January, 10 July 1867.

12. Lawson interviews.

13. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 63-64.

sermon "Why Are Demonstrations Essential?" Lawson denounced local black leadership's slavish dependance on negotiation. "We cannot change 350 years of social evil by negotiating only," he said. "We need a revolution in America—a revolution of the inner man," a revolution which would have to begin with the process of sensitizing white Memphians. Human nature so resisted change, Lawson said, that only the shock of boycotts and demonstrations would have any impact. These tactics, he was quick to assure his congregation, were wholly within the Christian and American traditions. "Demonstrations are very old," he explained. "Moses used them by placing blood on the door of the chosen ones; Jeremiah used them by wearing wooden and iron yokes while marching through the street; Jesus Christ used them as well as earlier Americans—Thomas Paine and the participants in the Boston Tea Party."¹⁴

Lawson told his Methodist congregation that Memphis could not be allowed to satisfy itself with its token desegregation. Why, even within their own denomination Negroes were turned away from the city's Methodist Hospital by its white administrators. When Lawson had complained of this policy to white Methodist ministers, they denied having any knowledge of it. "It is not that they didn't know," Lawson charged; "they just didn't care."¹⁵ Nor did the white school board care. Most blacks still attended segregated high schools so overcrowded that double shifts were required to accommodate them; and whites went to school a full day in less crowded, lily-white class-rooms. Demonstrations could stop this kind of discrimination, Lawson insisted; and to make his point, he organized a protest movement against the city school system. First he led an official NAACP delegation to the board to demand integration as a means of eliminating split shifts in black high schools; then he mobilized almost six hundred supporters to picket the downtown real estate office of the school board presi-

14. *Tri-State Defender*, 3 August 1963.

15. *Memphis World*, 3 August 1963.

dent. "March with joy," he cried to his people, "every stride we take is a stride towards freedom."¹⁶

Desegregation remained a major concern for Lawson; it was a cause for which he would take to the streets whenever whites seemed particularly slow to move towards a non-discriminatory system. But the problems of poverty began to take up more and more of his time, as he accepted the chairmanship of Memphis Area Project—South, an arm of the federal war on poverty.¹⁷ MAP—South sought to raise the standard of living in an inner-city area where 35,000 black residents were in economic distress. With an annual budget of \$190,000, and a staff of twelve full-time and fifty part-time workers, Lawson found jobs for the unemployed, protested housing code violations of landlords, and informed the people about available health and welfare services. Teenagers were hired to paint and repair homes owned by the elderly poor. Residents were organized into block clubs to discuss their problems and the need for uniting blacks to pressure local government into providing a fair share of city jobs.¹⁸

White critics accused Lawson of being an agitator, of searching for the issue which would produce a confrontation crisis and significant movement towards elimination of poverty and racism. And they say he found his issue on 12 February 1968 when 1,300 Memphis garbage collectors went out on strike, seeking equitable pay and recognition of their union, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. Reverend Lawson could use the strike to unite the local black community which had just been badly split by a mayoral election in which more than half the black community had repudiated A. W. Willis, a black candi-

16. *Tri-State Defender*, 7 September 1963; token desegregation had begun in the fall of 1961 with thirteen first graders attending four white schools.

17. Lawson also took an active stand against the Vietnam war, traveling to Indochina with a FOR team in 1965 and participating in the very few Memphis peace marches, *Memphis World*, 26 June 1965; *Tri-State Defender*, 30 April 1966.

18. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 11 September 1967.

date from Lawson's congregation, and thrown their support to the white incumbent who failed to win reelection anyway. A black community reunited around garbage collectors could confront the white power structure and produce a crisis. This conspiracy theory, however, is amusing to Reverend Lawson who originally thought the strike would be quickly settled. Rather than being a tactician who sought problems to exploit, Lawson said, he simply responded to human need. When asked to help the striking workers, he raised money for them and prayed for them, but did not go to the union meetings.¹⁹

Unfortunately Mayor Henry Loeb condemned the strike as illegal and threatened to fire the men if they did not return to work by February 15. With his segregationist record, the inflexible mayor had no black support to lose and never really tried to resolve the prolonged labor dispute which turned into a civil rights struggle as the black community became aware of the racial aspects of the strike, thanks to Mayor Loeb and the indiscriminate use of the chemical Mace by the police. On February 23, when a police car crowded a line of protesting sanitation workers, strikers grabbed the bumper and rocked the car. Police officers jumped out and turned their spray cans on every black in sight, innocent by-standers, ministers, and garbage collectors alike; and in so doing they converted moderates to radicals. Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, for one, testified that the Mace "nearly destroyed in two minutes my self-discipline and a belief in nonviolence that I have preached for 30 years."²⁰

Angry clergymen called an emergency meeting of the Inter-denominational Ministers' Alliance, the one organization which included all Negro denominations. The range of political opinion

19. Interview with Reverend Lawson, 15 February 1973; Jim Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 486-487; *Press-Scimitar*, 12, 14 February 1968.

20. Norman Pearlstine, "Garbage Strike Piles up Negro Unity," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1968.

represented at this meeting, and the extent to which the clergy were united in support of some protest, can be gauged by the participation of Elder Blair T. Hunt, one of the city's oldest and most conservative black ministers. In contrast to James Lawson, Hunt has been born in 1887 into a light-skinned, upper-class family of Memphis building contractors and public office holders. Brought up in the Beale Street Baptist Church, his earliest heroes had been preachers, and his future ambition the ministry. After attending Atlanta Baptist College, however, Hunt was diverted for awhile from his early goal of entering the church. Returning home in 1913, as one of the few black Memphians with a real academic preparation, Hunt took a public school teaching position, and within the course of the next two decades worked his way up to the top of the local black educational system, becoming principal of Booker T. Washinton High School in 1932.²¹

When Hunt's early interest in the ministry revived, he began serving as assistant pastor for Reverend T. O. Fuller's First Baptist Church. Then in 1921, when the black executives of Mississippi Life, a new insurance company in the city, organized their own Christian Church, fellow Baptist clergymen T. O. Fuller and Sutton E. Griggs advised Hunt to accept the call from these Disciples of Christ; since it was just a part-time minister's position, he would still be able to remain in the public schools. On this advice, Hunt left his Baptist faith to become Elder of the Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, a church whose flock of insurance executives made it the wealthiest congregation per capita in black Memphis.

When Hunt asked the white adviser for Negro congregations to instruct him in the doctrines of his new church, he was told, "you don't need any book but the Bible." The theological differences between the Christian and the Baptist churches were minimal. The founder, Alexander Campbell, had organized the Dis-

21. Interview with Elder Blair T. Hunt, 8 April 1969.

ciples of Christ a century before in West Virginia, in an effort to reclaim primitive Christianity from the mire of theological distortion. He returned to a literal reading of the Bible, and interpreted the New Testament in the manner of the Baptist Church, emphasizing the Lord's Supper and baptism by immersion.

As a part-time pastor who held a full-time job as a public school principal, Hunt felt obliged to grease the political machine of E. H. Crump, his secular employer. It was easy to rationalize that if Boss Crump opposed civil rights, and he did, at least he wanted the blacks to have decent health, housing, and recreational facilities; and Hunt tried to do what he could for his race by working with Mr. Crump as the Boss's champion and major spokesman in the black community. Mr. Crump had made funds available to improve the physical plant of Booker T. Washington High School, and when the city bought his school stadium new lights, Elder Hunt was overcome with gratitude: "Million of years ago," he declared at the dedication ceremony, "the Lord looked down and found this earth wrapped in darkness and he said let there be light and there was light. Our city fathers looked down on this stadium and found it wrapped in darkness and they said let there be light, and now we have these new lights and we thank them." Elder Hunt even went so far as to urge that Crump be nominated for the vice-presidency of the United States. "Thousands of Memphis Negroes will be happy," he wrote Senator K. D. McKellar in 1940, "if you'll use your influence in having Mr. E. H. Crump's name presented for Vice President. Please do so."²² A combination of realism and basic Christian pessimism about the chances for worldly progress enabled Elder Hunt to accommodate a political machine which denied his race equality. His eloquent sermons urged his congregation to set their thoughts on the joy of knowing Jesus, to prepare for the future, and to wait for God to change the white man. Even if blacks had

22. *Press-Scimitar*, 2 December 1939; William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 279.

fewer material goods than their white neighbors in Memphis, there were blessings enough for all of God's children. Hunt preached a healing, soothing ministry and led his people calmly through the racism of the Crump era.

Elder Hunt had been saying "yes" to white power for so long, that Memphians thought him incapable of ever saying "no"; but his friends knew that when James Lawson urged the black ministry of Memphis to defy Mayor Loeb, Hunt would be ready to go along. As Hunt later explained, the black churches must be flexible enough to adapt to the changing social climate. The churches might be morale builders, he said, "but just to sit in church and shout and sing will not make one a Christian any more than sitting in a chicken house will make one a chicken." Even Biblical literalism had lost its usefulness and now would have to be discarded: "Literalism with respect to the Bible is also a hinderance to the church. When it comes in conflict with common sense and the spirit of Jesus and the prophets, then literalism should be subdued."²³

So it was that both the elderly one-time accommodators and the angry young militants joined in the Ministers Alliance and voted unanimously to pressure the white establishment by calling an economic boycott. The targets were to be downtown stores and the two daily Scripps-Howard newspapers which had given the strike a bad press. The boycott was announced on Sunday morning from the pulpit of most of the city's black churches. Pastors also used their sermons to compare the strikers with the Old Testament prophets who had crusaded against injustice, took up special collections for the workers, and asked their congregations to join them in daily marches to downtown Memphis. In the days that followed, the ministers led long processions down Main

23. In the early 1950s Elder Hunt began to print his sermons weekly in the *Memphis World*; see 22 January 1952, 14 April and 6 June 1953 for especially eloquent examples; for his later rejection of literalism see Art Gilliam, "How Does Racism Affect Religion," *Commercial Appeal*, 12 January 1970.

Street during business hours to dramatize and strengthen the boycott. Workers, ministers, and community people filled nightly prayer meetings in the churches to capacity, and in less than a week raised \$15,000 for the strikers. Meanwhile downtown sales dropped by thirty-five percent. As Reverend H. Ralph Jackson observed: "The Negro community is more united than it was during the sit-ins of the early 1960s." "And garbage is only the beginning," added Reverend Ezekiel Bell. "We are going to get more and better jobs from the city and the downtown merchants. And those businesses that are patronized by blacks alone are going to be owned and managed by blacks."²⁴

After Mayor Loeb secured a court injunction, prohibiting union officials from participating in strike activities, the clergy were called upon to direct the action and voice the striker's demands. Their Sunday sermons, pep-talks, and protests before the city council all carried the same message: race was the key issue in the strike and violence was almost certain if the strikers did not win at least a partial victory.²⁵ In fact, violence had already surfaced in the dispute, in the form of isolated but ominous incidents of fire bombings, bottle throwing, and trash fires, which were reported almost nightly.

Reverend Lawson, who assumed the role of number one spokesman, brought in prominent civil rights leaders to help give the Memphis strike a national image. After all, Lawson said, "this is a significant turn in the civil rights movement and a new chapter in labor history. Never before had a union been backed by a whole community like this."²⁶ Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin spoke to a huge rally of 9,000 on the evening of March 14, and then on the eighteenth Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to an even larger rally. The spirit of the crowd, which was more enthusiastic

24. *Commercial Appeal*, 25, 26 February 1968; *New York Times*, 26 February 1968; *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 1968.

25. *Commercial Appeal*, 12 March 1968.

26. *New York Times*, 18 March 1968.

than any King had seen in recent months, led him to commit himself more to their struggle than he had at first intended. King declared that black Memphians ought to have a one day general strike, and the audience went wild. "You arrange a march for that day," he shouted, "and I'll come back to Memphis to lead it."²⁷

"Friday!" they shouted:

"Friday!" he agreed. But by Friday sixteen inches of snow blocked the streets and the event was rescheduled for the twenty-eighth.

In attempting to reschedule the march, the ministers were disturbed by the local black power group, the Invaders, who argued that if the demonstration were to have any effect, then violence was absolutely necessary. "Man," one Invader said, "if you expect honkies to get the message, you got to break some windows."²⁸ The churchmen insisted that King's march be peaceful: "You can join the rest of us in a nonviolent march," the ministers said, "or you can boycott it." But when the demonstration began on the morning of the twenty-eighth, the Invaders were there, mingling among the 5,000 peaceful marchers, equipped with heavy sticks. Beale Street people, shoplifters and pickpockets who had been unable to practice their trade because of the absence of crowds in the downtown area, were also there, gathered in groups along the sidewalks and they apparently shattered the first store windows as the march approached. Young militants left the line of march on Beale Street to join the window breaking and looting which turned the demonstration into a riot. Police responded with tear gas and force. One black youth was killed, sixty injured, three hundred arrested, and King's ability to lead his people in a nonviolent demonstration now was questioned by every white journalist in America. Since King was then organizing a poor people's march on Washington, he felt compelled to reestablish his nonviolent reputation in

27. Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 493.

28. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

Memphis; and it was while preparing for a second Memphis march that he was shot down by an assassin's bullet.

However tragically, and at whatever cost, the strike, the demonstrations, and King's death produced the confrontations between white and black which, Lawson believed, were needed to end white racism. In the days following King's assassination, Lawson set about to harvest the potential of white concern. When 9,000 Memphians gathered at Crump Stadium for a symbolic demonstration that "Memphis Cares," Reverend Lawson used the occasion to further prick the consciences of white Memphians. Questioning white sincerity, Lawson warned that if whites had come only so that they could say "I was there and all is well," their attempt at a facile expiation of sin and guilt was all in vain. If they were sorry only that the assassination had happened in Memphis and soiled the reputation of the "City of Good Abode," then their presence, their gesture of brotherhood, meant absolutely nothing at all. "How could anyone have a good feeling about Memphis when one of America's finest sons was shot down in her streets?" Lawson asked. "Memphis will be known for a long time as the place where Martin Luther King was crucified. Yes, crucified. We have witnessed a crucifixion here in Memphis." True repentance for the assassination of King, Lawson warned, could never be demonstrated by sorrow. Memphis could show true repentance only by "a determination to work for transformations, real change, a move from racism to genuine brotherhood."²⁹

To get white Memphians to take concrete action to end racial injustice, Lawson kept the pressure on the white leadership which had already capitulated to the demands of the garbage workers. He and his organization, Community on the Move for Equality, demanded satisfaction in long-standing complaints. Black leaders initiated talks with the city council on police brutality, and they

29. *New York Times*, 8 April 1968.

met with the Chamber of Commerce to discuss unemployment. With the united support of the black community, Lawson could now threaten to boycott those white business firms which refused to alter their hiring practices. "We have the troops now," Lawson warned, "to move systematically from industry to industry."³⁰

But if, in the following months, Reverend Lawson saw progress, he found it was hard to eliminate injustice. "Memphis is still essentially a town racist in mood, looking to the past and still excluding consideration of the black and the poor," was Lawson's estimate a year after the King assassination. "The plantation theory of government for the most part still dominates. We have made small beginnings in terms of black and white people waking up and trying to remake the city into a humane place."³¹

30. *Ibid.*, 21 April 1968.

31. *Tri-State Defender*, 17 May 1969.

10

Black Theology

Creative ministers have always sought to interpret the doctrines of Christianity in ways which would relate to the needs and experiences of their communities, but it was not until the black power revolt that Negro clergymen began to construct a Black Theology for Afro-Americans. The militant clergy's declaration of independence from white theology came in the nineteen-sixties as part of the quest for black identity and the race's growing dissatisfaction with white institutions which had done very little to end racism and poverty. The new theology was intentionally fashioned as an instrument for liberating black people.

To align religion with the black power movement, seventy-five clergymen from the major denominations met in Dallas in 1967. They organized themselves as the National Committee of Negro Churchmen and appointed a Commission to draft a statement of their new theological position. Their credo, which was finished two years later, affirmed: "For us, Black theology is the theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that

the black community can see the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of 'blackness.'" Couched in the rhetoric of the black revolution, the declaration went on to characterize Jesus as the liberator of the oppressed, who wanted blacks to affirm their full dignity as persons by liberating themselves through any means necessary. The theology Commission concluded its statement with the words of Eldridge Cleaver, "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our efforts to gain it."¹

The Report of the Theology Commission was followed by the publication of a series of books further to refine and explain Black Theology. The first to appear were James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), which explained that the black church must give its support to looters and rioters since no religious doctrine was acceptable if it obstructed the black demand for "freedom now." Albert Cleage, author of *The Black Messiah* (1969), characterized the Apostle Paul as an Uncle Tom who wanted to identify with his white Roman oppressors; he argued that the Pauline interpretation of Christianity should be rejected and exchanged for the historical Jesus (a black Jew who led an underground revolutionary movement to build a black nation). In *Black and White Power Subreption* (1969) Joseph R. Washington Jr. contributed the opinion that if the black power revolution were to occur, the black church would need a theology of freedom for leading the revolution in an intelligent direction. Members of the NCBC Theological Commission, J. Deotis Roberts—in *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (1971)—and Joseph A. Johnson Jr.—in *The Soul of the Black Preacher* (1971)—added that the new theology

1. "Bishop Johnson Interviewed on Black Theology," *Christian Index* (30 January 1969), 5; Grant S. Shockley, "Ultimatum and Hope," *Christian Century* LXXXVI (12 February 1969), 217-219; "Black Theology: A Statement of the National Committee of Black Churchmen," *Christian Century* LXXXVI (15 October 1969), 1310.

should carry not only a separatist message of liberation, but also the post-revolutionary goal of reconciliation between the races. They shared the view that the black clergy were now involved in "the most significant movement in theology during the past 100 years."

In Memphis, a few ministers had picked up the new message even before the publications and annual meetings of the NCBC popularized Black Theology. Reverend William Smith of Collins Chapel, for example, learned the new theology at a February 1968 SCLC seminar in Miami and then returned home to take part in the Memphis garbage strike. This thirty-five year old C.M.E. minister held a graduate degree from his denominational seminary in Atlanta, where the biracial faculty had made no special effort to relate the message of Jesus to the problems of black people. Smith might as well have attended a white seminary, he later reflected, for he certainly came out with a very white brand of cultural Christianity, replete with restrained hymns, innocuous sermons, and conventional social activities for the young people of the church. For more than a decade after his graduation from Gammon Seminary in 1957 Reverend Smith had preached without realizing that black freedom should be the central concern of his ministry.²

Then in early 1968 Smith received an invitation to have his expenses paid to a five-day seminar for ministers from large urban centers. Following the summer riots of 1967 the Ford Foundation had granted the SCLC \$230,000 to give 150 black clergymen urban leadership training to help alleviate the crisis of the cities.³ During the seminar these ministers were told by recognized authorities in the fields of education, employment, housing, welfare, and urban sociology, that blacks would remain at the bottom of the Great Society unless leaders organized into a

2. Interview with Reverend William Smith, 6 June 1972.

3. *New York Times*, 6 January 1968; Jim Bishop, *The Days of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1971), 490.

powerful body and demanded programs for social change. The formal presentations, the discussions among ministers, and the militant talk of white racism and impending black genocide opened Reverend Smith's eyes to the black man's plight in America.

Reverend Smith returned to Memphis persuaded that social action should become the central concern of a black clergyman. Convinced that the Gospel, once released from its white theological interpretation, revealed that the central message of Jesus Christ was liberation from oppression, Reverend Smith began to reassess Jesus' words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19) Reverend Smith had now discovered "what he should be about," and moved from the conservative Collins Chapel to Trinity C.M.E. Church in north Memphis, a congregation of the masses. Two-thirds of the five hundred members at Trinity were rural blacks who had moved to Memphis for jobs as common laborers, and were thus a congregation sorely in need of the message of liberation, the survival theology of black consciousness and black power in a hostile white society.

The pictures of a white Jesus came down at Trinity, and though Reverend Smith did not repaint them black—he preferred not to make the Christian faith a matter of color, he later explained—his sermons left no doubt that Jesus was on the side of liberating black people. Styling himself as an angry black preacher, Smith adopted the militant rhetoric of James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, and preached that Jesus was "a radical, a revolutionary who was put to death for treason. He was an anarchist. He was a Malcolm X, a Martin Luther King Jr. . . ." Sermons of rage, Smith believed, would plant revolution in the hearts and minds of his congregation, but as a minister, he was also obligated to get out of the temple and into the streets to fight

poverty. It was part of his calling to gather and distribute information about available health and welfare services, to fight employment discrimination in the building trade unions, and to organize the north Memphis people to protest racist decisions made by the school board. "The role of the church," Reverend Smith told his congregation, "is to struggle against the forces of injustice and to struggle against the structural inequity of this society. We cannot return to business as usual. What we must be doing is struggling day by day against the social, political, and economic forces of depression within this society to liberate our people. Brothers and sisters, this it seems to me should be what we ought to be about. . . ."⁴

While Reverend Smith's conversion to a new Black Theology was triggered by a specific event, black awareness came about more gradually in others, like Father James Lyke, the first black Catholic priest to be assigned to a parish to Memphis. Father Lyke had been born a Chicago Baptist in 1939 but converted to Catholicism, graduated from St. Joseph Theological Seminary, and earned a masters in theology from the Antonianum in Rome. By the late 1960s his racial consciousness had developed into a militancy which led him to join many of America's 170 Negro Catholic priests in a caucus supporting the race's black power aspirations. At their national meeting in 1968 this group denounced their Roman Catholic Church as a white racist institution which failed to promote change or to provide black leadership for the black community. Father Lyke and the black caucus asked their bishops to establish a National Office for Black Catholics authorized to plan action programs in the black community and for researching and publicizing valid forms of black Catholic liturgy.⁵

4. William Smith, "Witnessing to the Good News," *Christian Index* (11 May 1972).

5. John C. Haughey, "Black Catholicism," *America* CXX (22 March 1969), 325-327; Richard Rashke, "Trust for Black Catholics," *Commonweal* XCII (20 March 1970), 35-37; Memphis established its first Negro Catholic congre-

The assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. prompted the Franciscan Father to move his ministry from Cleveland to the city where King had been killed. Immediately upon his arrival in September 1968 Lyke became involved in local civil rights activities, and was soon a board member of the Memphis SCLC and chairman of Memphis Area Project—South. Within the Catholic Church he was appointed assistant pastor of St. Thomas, where 850 adult blacks worshipped, and after a year was made full pastor of the church and head of Father Bertrand Elementary School. As the school administrator, Lyke introduced a strong emphasis on black studies, replacing the traditional course in European History with the more immediately relevant Afro-American History. He opened an Afro-American Hall in the school, where pictures of all black leaders were on display. And an Afro-American flag was placed in every classroom. Father Lyke also took steps to convert St. Thomas into a black church. A small print of Malcolm X appeared in the vestibule of the church, and next to it one of Martin Luther King Jr. Inside the sanctuary, the rows of pillars along the side aisles were painted in the colors of liberation—red, green, and black. In front, flanking the altar, were two ten-foot oil paintings of black saints wearing afros and peace symbols. St. Benedict the Moor was a sixteenth-century black slave in Sicily, who became a Franciscan lay brother. His counsel had been sought by persons of every class, and he was so venerated in Italy, Spain, and Latin America that the church canonized him in 1807. The other black saint, St. Martin de Porres, a sixteenth and early seventeenth-century Dominican lay brother in Peru, was known as a special friend of the poor, and was canonized in 1962. Just as black art and history were utilized to convert St. Thomas from an Italian to an Afro-American

gation in 1907 (*Commercial Appeal*, 23 January 1909) but the church grew slowly, increasing to no more than 200 in twenty years, John T. Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: St. Joseph's Society Press, 1929), 60, 114; *Tri-State Defender*, 3 November 1951.

church, so was the music of the people—spirituals, gospel music, and jazz—also brought in and made part of the ritual of worship.

These changes were not made without some resistance from the congregation, however; and Father Lyke made use of sermons, discussion groups, and the church bulletin to develop in his people a healthy black pride. Still the opposition to emphasis on blackness was not easily overcome. Once, after Father Lyke had spoken on a panel about ways students could be taught to take pride in blackness, a parishioner rose to object: "I don't know why we're talking about all this black stuff. The thing to do is to get the kids a good education and get them through school. Forget about this black thing and black history and black-white business." The people applauded these sentiments and only a few came forward afterwards with words of encouragement: "Father, it will take time."⁶

Despite the resistance to his new theology, Father Lyke was persuaded that by enriching the Catholic liturgy with Afro-American culture and preaching the message of Black Theology, he was helping his parishioners to be all that they could be, something which no white priest could have done. Blacks had been taught to hate themselves, yet the word of God could free them from self-hate; for the Scriptures taught that all men are somebody, they are all created in the image and likeness of God. "The work of our liberation is essential to the Gospel of Jesus," Father Lyke said; 'it is the very core of Jesus' message (Luke 4:18, 7:22; Matt. 25:31), and therefore it is the mission of the church and the sign of the church's faithfulness to Christ." Black people were a chosen race, like the early Hebrews, the weak whom God had chosen to confound the strong, and even the Sacraments were a celebration of black liberation. As the Holy Eucharist celebrated the liberation of Christ and his sacrifice for the dis-

6. "Black Soul: Life and Resurrection," (Pittsburgh: National Black Sisters' Conference, n.d.), 32-33; all changes made by Father Lyke, however, were approved by the St. Thomas parish council and the Father Bertrand school board.

inherited, its spiritual food was meant to help blacks unite and persevere in the work of their own liberation. "We partake of the same spiritual bread and the same spiritual drink—'liberation food'!" Father Lyke said. "Yes, we as Black people celebrate and sacralize our unity gathered around the table of the Lord. In the presence of the Lord we must be who we are, for this is the way God made us. Here we put off the old man, the product of a history of discrimination and injustice, and put on the new man created in justice and truth."⁷

While Black Theology brought a sharp redirection in the ministry of Reverends Smith and Lyke, another pastor, Reverend Henry Starks of St. James A.M.E. Church, considered himself a black theologian even though he never rejected the doctrines he had learned years before in the Department of Religion at Fisk University. Starks had been born in Memphis in 1922, the son of a Baptist minister, but his father died and the family grew up in poverty. When he had finished high school, an A.M.E. minister encouraged young Starks to enter the Methodist ministry. He earned a B.A. at the local LeMoyné College and an M.A. in religion at Fisk.

It was during his graduate study that Starks read the works of Reverend Howard Thurman who had grown up on his grandmother's religious teachings.⁸ During her years as a servant, it seems, the white ministers had always preached from Paul's text: "Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters, . . . as unto Christ."⁹ Christianity, Thurman's grandmother had insisted, was not the teachings of Paul; when slaves

7. James Lyke, "Black liturgy-black liberation," *Freeing the Spirit* 1 (August 1971), 14-17.

8. Interview with Reverend Henry Starks, 12 July 1972; Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 105-112; James Earl Massey, "Howard Thurman and Rufus Jones, Two Mystics," *Journal of Negro History* LVII (April 1972), 190-195.

9. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), 30-31.

Black Theology

had held their own religious meetings their black preacher had told them: "You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God's children." Christianity had thus given blacks a sense of personal worth and let them identify with God's miracles of liberation.¹⁰ Even when Howard Thurman had graduated from Morehouse College and Rochester Theology Seminary, his grandmother's religion remained the basis for his thinking. *Jesus and the Disenherited* (1949) explained that Jesus, who was born a poor Jew and not a citizen of the Roman Empire like Paul, had created a message of survival for the oppressed. Jesus had told the poor, the disenherited, and the dispossessed that they were children of a God who watched over them; and with faith in God's care, they could develop the inner strength to overcome fear, deception, and hatred within themselves. In this way, the message of Christ armed the poor with a power to strive and achieve.

More a religious mystic than a social activist, Howard Thurman was out of step with the later black theologians who seemed more concerned with developing secular power than inner spiritual resources. Even though Thurman and the black power clergy did use the same evidence—Luke 4: 18, spirituals, and slave exhortations—they had little more in common than the shared conviction that God speaks to the oppressed. Thurman could never have agreed, for example, with black theologian James H. Cone, that hatred of whites was a healthy reaction to oppression; in fact, Reverend Thurman went on to organize an interracial congregation in San Francisco and then to become Dean of the chapel at Boston University.

But Howard Thurman did speak to the moderate Reverend Henry Starks, whose diplomacy had helped him be elected president of the Memphis Interdenominational Ministers Alliance, and whose scholarly temperament led him to become the first black instructor at Memphis Theological Seminary, a liberal

10. Howard Thurman, *Deep River: Reflections on the Religious Insight of Certain of the Negro Spirituals* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1969), 11-12.

graduate school of theology for the white Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Reverend Starks was certainly not one of those angry young clergymen attracted to the heated rhetoric of James H. Cone. He preferred instead the cool reason of Howard Thurman; and even if Thurman had not been a social activist, his teachings did not interfere with Reverend Stark's community work. As president of James Lawson's Community on the Move for Equality and head of the locally funded North Memphis Action Program, which attempted to solve the problems of poverty, Reverend Starks could work side by side with Black Theology activists while retaining his allegiance to Thurman. It was simply that he talked more of reconciliation than of revolution. "There is a crying need for involvement," Starks said. "For reconciliation between black and white people; the alienated and the complacent; the inherited and the disinherited. I feel deeply that we will eventually meet the challenge, but I don't expect it in the immediate future, nor without agonizing moments."¹¹

In this way, Henry Starks bridged the gap between young black theologians and the overwhelming majority of Memphis pastors who showed little interest in the new doctrines. Understandably, those who had served apprenticeships under older ministers, mastering only one book, the Bible, never had much use for abstract philosophy; but even among the seminary trained Baptists there was little enthusiasm for Black Theology. NAACP activist Reverend Samuel B. Kyles, for one, said that neither he nor other pastors of the Progressive Baptist Convention had any real interest in the doctrines;¹² and indeed, Most Memphis pastors took an even more conservative position closer to that of Bishop J. O. Patterson of the Church of God in Christ.

Patterson had been elected presiding Bishop in 1968, following seven years of leadership strife that afflicted the church on

11. *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, 19 July 1969.

12. Interview with Reverend Samuel B Kyles, 1 June 1972.

the death of the founder, Charles H. Mason.¹³ The new presiding Bishop was a second generation Saint. Born in rural Mississippi in 1912, he moved to Memphis in 1923 with his parents and grew up in the Church of God in Christ. Young Patterson participated in the Willing Worker Department and served as a banjo accompanist for Deborah Mason and her group of gospel singers, the Templeairs. Patterson married Bishop Mason's daughter in 1923, and two years later the young businessman in drycleaning and coal retailing was ordained an Elder and assigned to a tiny eight member church in the nearby town of Gates. Patterson preached to West Tennessee congregations for almost three decades; then he built a new Pentecostal Temple on Wellington Street in Memphis and gathered a following of more than a thousand. In 1952 he was made a bishop by his father-in-law, C. H. Mason, and appointed to the three-man executive committee which helped the elderly presiding bishop supervise church business.¹⁴

During the local civil rights movement of the fifties Bishop Patterson took a more positive role than any other Memphis pastor of his denomination. He served on the executive committee of the Ministers and Citizens League and lent his support to the student sit-ins at a time when other Church of God in Christ ministers were reluctant to involve themselves so actively. Though they sympathized with his opposition to racial discrimination, these colleagues did not enjoy Patterson's family connections and would not risk offending such founders of the church as elderly state overseer A. B. McEwen, who believed the clergy should avoid political action.¹⁵ The freedom movement made a

13. German R. Ross, *History and Formative Years of the Church of God in Christ* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1969), 77-92.

14. Frances Burnett Kelley, *Here Am I, Send Me: The Dramatic Story of Presiding Bishop J. O. Patterson, Challenging and Bold, Leader of the Church of God in Christ* (Memphis: Church of God in Christ Publishing House, 1970), 13-79.

15. *Tri-State Defender*, 8 October 1955, 10 December 1960; *Press-Scimitar*, 8 October 1955; interview with Bishop J. O. Patterson, 3 August 1972.

stronger appeal to the younger members of the denomination, however; and on being elected presiding Bishop, Patterson prayed that God would use him as the mediator between the two generations. "I am old enough to love our founding fathers, to indulge in listening to their wills and their wishes, to sympathize with them in the great efforts and sacrifices that we have made to bring our church thus far," the fifty-six year old leader told his denomination. But he also took pride in his ability to communicate with the youth: "I am thankful that I am young enough to take the youth of our church by the hand and speak their language and let them know that you don't have to go to some other church or reformation or institution to use that Master's Degree or that Ph.D. that you have, but the church is making room for you and we need you."¹⁶

Under his leadership, Patterson's denomination established its first graduate school of religion. The Charles Harrison Mason Theological Seminary joined four other black institutions in Atlanta's Interdenominational Theological Center which shared a library and had a common faculty. Appointed to teach the courses in denominational doctrine, history, and organization, was Leonard Lovett who had graduated from Saints' Junior College in Mississippi, Morehouse in Atlanta, and Crozier Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. At Crozier, Lovett had enrolled in such social gospel courses as "The Theology of Politics," which emphasized the practical applications of Jesus' teachings to the problems of the poor and disadvantaged. Elder Lovett's activist orientation was thus compatible with Patterson's, and he spoke for COGIC members who wanted to "move from the periphery of Protestantism to the mainstream, and help to provide the moral and spiritual leadership so badly needed in America."¹⁷

16. Kelley, *Here Am I, Send Me*, 7.

17. *Whole Truth*, June, November 1970, September 1971; Kelley, *Here Am I, Send Me*, 98.

While moving the Church of God in Christ into the American mainstream, with social action programs, Bishop Patterson continued a rigorous spiritual ministry, which emphasized the need for greater moral discipline. "Our cities for the most part are modern Sodoms and Gomorrah," he cried:

The gap of respect for the law is too big and getting bigger. Millions of clean citizens look down on policemen as being irresponsible immature trigger happy gunslingers who, like drugstore cowboys, play with their pistols. The streets of our cities are like Jericho roads of old . . . Thieves, thugs, cursing, swearing, using vulgar four letter words, throwing beer cans and whiskey bottles on other people's lawns and even church lawns, raping, stealing, robbing and killing, are even now threatening the very existence of the church and Christianity.¹⁸

As one who stressed his church's traditional opposition to violence, Bishop Patterson shunned the rhetoric of theologian James H. Cone. He also rejected racial separatism. The Church of God in Christ had always been interracial, with a few white members at first, and later converts of all races, in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the United States. "Saints," Bishop Patterson asked his followers, "what is the Church of God in Christ doing to relate to everyday problems and concerns of black people, poor white people, poor people in general?"¹⁹ "God is not black or white," Bishop Patterson insisted, "God is a Spirit." God spoke not to any one race but to all people; and neither God nor the Bishop could create a Black Theology.

18. *Whole Truth*, November 1970.

19. Interview with Bishop J. O. Patterson, 3 August 1972; *Whole Truth*, December 1971; the census of members, begun by Bishop Patterson, has not been completed but as an estimate the church claims eighty local congregations and a total membership of three million.

The black awareness movement never moved the Memphis clergy over to a Black Theology, but was not without its effect. While the ministers had always taught self-respect and personal morality, the freedom movement redirected their concern toward the sins of society. Memphis pastors now preached Jesus' message of liberation for the poor and the oppressed with a new militancy.

Epilogue: Pastors and Leaders

The Black Memphis clergy has been otherworldly in its rhetoric while in practice remaining vitally in touch with the people's here-and-now. If during the first years of freedom these churchmen left politics to the secular militants and fraternal leaders, their concerns were never restricted to the spiritual welfare of their congregations. Reverend Morris Henderson, who financed a day school with \$75 a month from his church treasury, was joined by the greater number of his fellow clergymen in the resolve "to labor by every means for the spiritual and intellectual advancement of the present and rising generation." Despite Henderson's lack of education and his avoidance of protest leadership, he and his colleagues were fully dedicated to improving their people in both this world and the next.

The second generation of pastors—B. A. Imes, R. N. Countee, W. A. Brinkley, and Taylor Nightingale—was more aggressive in protest and willing to assume civic and political leadership. They confronted an already growing white racism which eventually forced them out of the city during the 1890s, and issued in an

era of accommodation. Naturally, the accommodationist clergymen in this age of Booker T. Washington never dared openly to protest against the Jim Crow laws, but they never abandoned their hopes for equality in this world either. Accepting the political tactic of accommodation and compromise did not mean that a pastor had repudiated this world and become altogether other-worldly. T. O. Fuller and Sutton E. Griggs devoted their best energies to problems of race relations in the here-and-now, and not in the saving of souls for the hereafter. Even the Church of God in Christ, which began as a spiritual sect, could not keep its attention diverted from the present. Its Bishop C. H. Mason opened the pulpit of his annual Convocation in 1949 to black Chicago Congressman William L. Dawson, and the following year he extended the same invitation to the governor of Tennessee.

When the federal government finally offered encouragement, Memphis clergymen united with black attorneys and businessmen to provide leadership for the local civil rights movement. Pastors organized voter registration drives, political campaigns, protest demonstrations, and even ran for political office. In 1967, when blacks were first elected to the city council, Baptist Reverend James L. Netters took a council seat along with a black attorney and a black businessman. Reverend Netters was defeated by a funeral director in his bid for reelection so that, once again, no minister held office in the city, but scores of other churchmen were active in politics and community problems.

The clerical leaders in Memphis retained the traditional concern for their community's welfare but had broken from the Biblical conservatism which distinguished their forebearers. Those pastors who now assumed leadership in attacking racism and poverty had been trained in theological schools and were certainly not Biblical literalists; and the most outspoken, like Reverend James Lawson—an active member of the Theology Commission of the National Committee of Black Churchmen—were also involved in the new Black Theology which sought more fully to explain and promote the liberation of black people.

Index

- Abernathy, Reverend Ralph, 122
 accommodation, 30-34, 52-54, 55-69,
 77-86, 101-103
- African Methodist Episcopal Church
 (AME): first years in Memphis, 7, 15,
 21-22, 24
- AME congregations: Avery Chapel, 7,
 21-22, 47
- AME ministers: Reverend H. Ralph
 Jackson, 113, 130, 134; Reverend
 Dwight V. Kyle, 106-107; Reverend
 Henry Starks, 146-148; Bishop
 Henry M. Turner, 42
- African survivals in black religion, 1-2,
 21-22, 92
- Alcorn, Reverend Dewitt T., vii
*Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Greatness
 of the Negro*, 59
- American Missionary Association, 6
- Avery Chapel, 7, 21-22, 47
- Azusa Street revival, 88-90
- Bailey, Reverend Africa, 7-8
- Bailey, Bishop J. S., 96
- Baptist Church: early white paternal-
 ism, 3-5; origins of black congrega-
 tions, 8-15
- Baptist congregations: Beale Street
 Baptist Church, 8-13, 35, 103-106;
 Chelsea Baptist Church, 10; Mt.
 Moriah Baptist Church, 112; Mt.
 Nebo Baptist Church, 107; Metro-
 politan Baptist Church, 116; Salem
 Baptist Church, 8; St. John Baptist,
 15, 107; Tabernacle Baptist Church,
 35, 78-86; Washington Street Baptist
 Church, 37-38
- Baptist ministers: Reverend W. A.
 Brinkley, 32-47; Reverend Africa
 Bailey, 7-8; Reverend R. N. Coun-
 tee, 35-37, 40, 47; Reverend T. O.
 Fuller, 55-69; Reverend Sutton E.
 Griggs, 71-86, 99; Reverend A. L.
 Hall, 59; Reverend Morris Hender-
 son, 8-13; Reverend Ben Hooks,
 111-112; Reverend Samuel B. Kyles,
 115, 116, 148; Reverend G. A. Long,
 103-106; Reverend Van J. Malone,

- 107; Reverend Hubbard Meredith, 10-11; Reverend J. L. Netters, 115, 116; Reverend Taylor Nightingale, 44-46; Reverend R. W. Norsworthy, 112-113; Reverend S. A. Owen, 107, 116-117; Reverend W. H. Phillips, 14; Reverend E. McEwen Williams, 107; Reverend S. N. Vass, 52
- Barker, Elder V. M., 95
- Beale Street Baptist Church, 8-13, 35, 103-106
- Bell, Reverend Ezekiel, 134
- black politics, 14, 27-34, 108-118, 154
- black theology, 139-152
- Brinkley, Reverend W. A., 37-38, 40, 47
- Browning, Reverend D. W., 114
- Bunche, Ralph, 102
- Bunton, Reverend Henry Clay, 108-111
- Centenary Methodist Church, 6, 127
- Christian Index*, vii, 19
- Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME): origins, 18-24; moves north, 108-110
- CME congregations: Collins Chapel, 3, 17-24, 47, 103, 113, 141-142; Mt. Olive Cathedral, 110, 112, 114; Mt. Pisgah, 114; Trinity, 142
- CME ministers: Reverend D. W. Browning, 114; Reverend Henry C. Bunton, 108-111; Reverend D. S. Cunningham, 113-115; Reverend C. H. Phillips, 20; Reverend William Smith, 141-143; Reverend Arthur W. Womack, 103
- Church of God in Christ (COGIC); origins, 87-100; second generation, 148-151
- COGIC ministers: Bishop J. S. Bailey, 96; Elder V.M. Barker, 95; Mother Lillian Coffey, 95; Bishop S. M. Crouch, 96; Elder D. J. Young, 94, 96; Bishop C. H. Mason, 88-100, 148-149, 154; Bishop J. O. Patterson, 148-151
- civil rights protest, 27-30, 42-43, 71-77, 103-118
- Coffey, Mother Lillian, 95
- Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, *see* Christian Methodist Episcopal Church
- Collins Chapel, 3, 20-24, 47, 103, 113, 141-142
- Clark, Reverend George Virgil, 52-54
- Congregational Church: comes to Memphis, 6; Second Congregational Church, 41, 52
- Congregational ministers; Reverend George Virgil Clark, 52-54; Reverend B. A. Imes, 41-52
- Countee, Reverend R. N., 35-37, 40, 47
- Crouch, Bishop S. M., 96
- Crump, E. H., 64, 69, 103-106, 132
- Cunningham, Reverend D. S., 113, 114, 115
- Dickinson, Charles C., 11
- Disciples of Christ, 131-133
- Dixon, Thomas Jr., 62, 71, 76
- DuBois, W. E. B., 61, 77
- Emmanuel Chapel, 14
- Episcopal Church, 14
- Exum, Reverend John M., vii
- Fellowship of Reconciliation, 120, 122
- Forrest, Nathan Bedford, n. 8, 32-33
- fraternal orders, *see* secret societies

- Free Speech*, 44-45, 49
- Fuller, Reverend Thomas O.: North Carolina senator, 55-57; accommodation and black pride, 57-62; Inter-Racial League, 63-64; black history, 65-69
- Griggs, Reverend Sutton E.: militant novelist, 71-78; establishes institutional church, 78-81; advocates efficient racial traits, 82-85; failure, 85, 99
- Hall, Reverend A. L., 59
- Henderson, Reverend Morris, 8-13
- Henley, Hezekiah, 32-33
- History of the Negro Baptists of Tennessee*, 68-69
- Hooks, Reverend Ben, 111-112
- Howe Institute, 39, 52, 60-61, 65, 107
- Hunt, Elder Blair T., 131-133
- Imes, Reverend B. A.: reads anti-Masonic paper, 35; education, 41; advocates equality, 42-43; protests oppression, 47-51, leaves Memphis, 52
- Imperium In Imperio*, 73-74
- institutional church, 77-79
- Inter-Racial League, 63-64
- Jackson, Reverend H. Ralph, 113, 130, 134
- Jackson, Dr. Joseph H., 116
- Jim Crow laws, 14, 29-30, 57-58, 109-118
- Jones, Reverend Daniel H., 3
- King, Reverend Martin Luther, Jr.: speaks in Memphis, 112; leaves National Baptist Convention, 116-117; advises James M. Lawson Jr., 122; supports sanitation strikers, 134-136; influence on Father Lyke, 144
- Kyle, Reverend Dwight V., 106-107
- Kyles, Reverend Samuel B., 115, 116, 148
- Lawrence, Harry, 1
- Lawson, Reverend James M. Jr.: becomes pacifist, 119-121; southern secretary for FOR, 122-123; Nashville campaign, 123-125; SNCC, 125-126; in Memphis, 127-137; black theology, 154
- Lee, George W., 108
- Living Way*, 35, 37, 39, 47
- Long, Reverend George Albert, 103-106
- Love, Reverend Roy, 107-108, 110-112, 115, 116
- Lyke, Father James, 143-146
- Malone, Reverend Van J., 107
- Mason, Bishop Charles H., 88-100, 149, 154
- Mason, Mrs. Elsie W., vii
- Memphis Baptist Bible and Normal Institute, 39, *see* Howe Institute
- Meredith, Reverend Hubbard, 10-11
- Methodist Church, 3, 18-19; *see also*, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, United Methodist Episcopal Church
- Metropolitan Baptist Church, 116
- militancy, 14, 27-30, 44-51, 71-78, 103-151
- Missionary Baptist*, 10-11

- Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church, 131
- Ministers and Citizens League, 108-111
- Mt. Moriah Baptist Church, 112
- Mt. Nebo Baptist Church, 107
- Mt. Olive Cathedral, 110, 112, 114
- Mt. Pisgah, 114
- music, 2, 6, 22-23, 92, 145
- Muste, A. J., 120-121
- NAACP, 64, 85, 106-107, 111-115, 127
- Nashville, 12, 77, 122-125
- National Baptist Convention, 116-117
- Netters, Reverend James L., 115, 116, 154
- Niagara Movement, 76-77
- Nightingale, Reverend Taylor, 44-46
- non-violence, 48, 53, 73-74, 119-137
- Norsworthy, Reverend R. W., 112-113
- Owen, Reverend S. A., 107, 116-117
- Patterson, Bishop J. O., 148-151
- pentecostal holiness, 87-100
- Phillips, Reverend C. H., 20
- Phillips, Reverend W. H., 14
- Pictorial History of the American Negro*, 65, 66, 67
- Presbyterian Church: teaches literacy, 4; fails to attract black members, 15; Reverend Ezekiel Bell, 134
- Progressive Baptist Convention, 116-117
- protest, *see* militancy
- Randolph, A. Philip, 120
- Rankin, H. N., 7
- reconstruction, 26-34, 62-63
- Roman Catholic Church, 143-146
- Salem Baptist Church, 8
- sanitation strike, 129-137
- Second Congregational Church, 6, 41, 52
- secret societies, 25-40
- Seymour, Reverend William J., 88-89, 96
- Shaw, Ed, 27-33
- Silliman, Samuel G., 8-9
- sit-in movement, 113-118, 123-125
- Smith, Reverend William, 141-143
- Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SLCLC), 118, 127, 141-142
- Starks, Reverend Henry, 146-148
- Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), 125-126
- Sugarmon, Russell, 111
- Tabernacle Baptist Church, 35, 78-86
- Taylor, Reverend Gardner C., 116
- Tennessee Colored Missionary Baptist Association, 9-10
- Thurman, Reverend Howard, 147-148
- Toncray, Silas T., 4-5
- Trinity CME Church, 142
- Turner, Bishop Henry M., 42
- Turner, Jesse, 127
- United Methodist Church, 6, 119-137
- Vanderbilt Divinity School, 122-123
- Vass, Reverend S. N., 52
- Walker, J. E., 108
- Washington Street Baptist Church, 37-38
- Wells, Ida B., 44-46, 49, 51
- Western Freedman's Aid Commission, 7
- White, Elizabeth, 97
- Whole Truth*, vii, 94
- Williams, Reverend E. McEwen, 107
- Willis, A. W., 127, 129
- Womack, Reverend Arthur W., 103
- Zion Cemetery, 34, n. 92

A 17612
 THEOLOGY LIBRARY
 CLAREMONT, CALIF.